

SPORT IN WILDEST BRITAIN

H. HESKETH PRICHARD

ILLUSTRATED FROM WATER COLOUR DRAWINGS
BY
E. A. WILSON

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SPORT IN WILDEST BRITAIN

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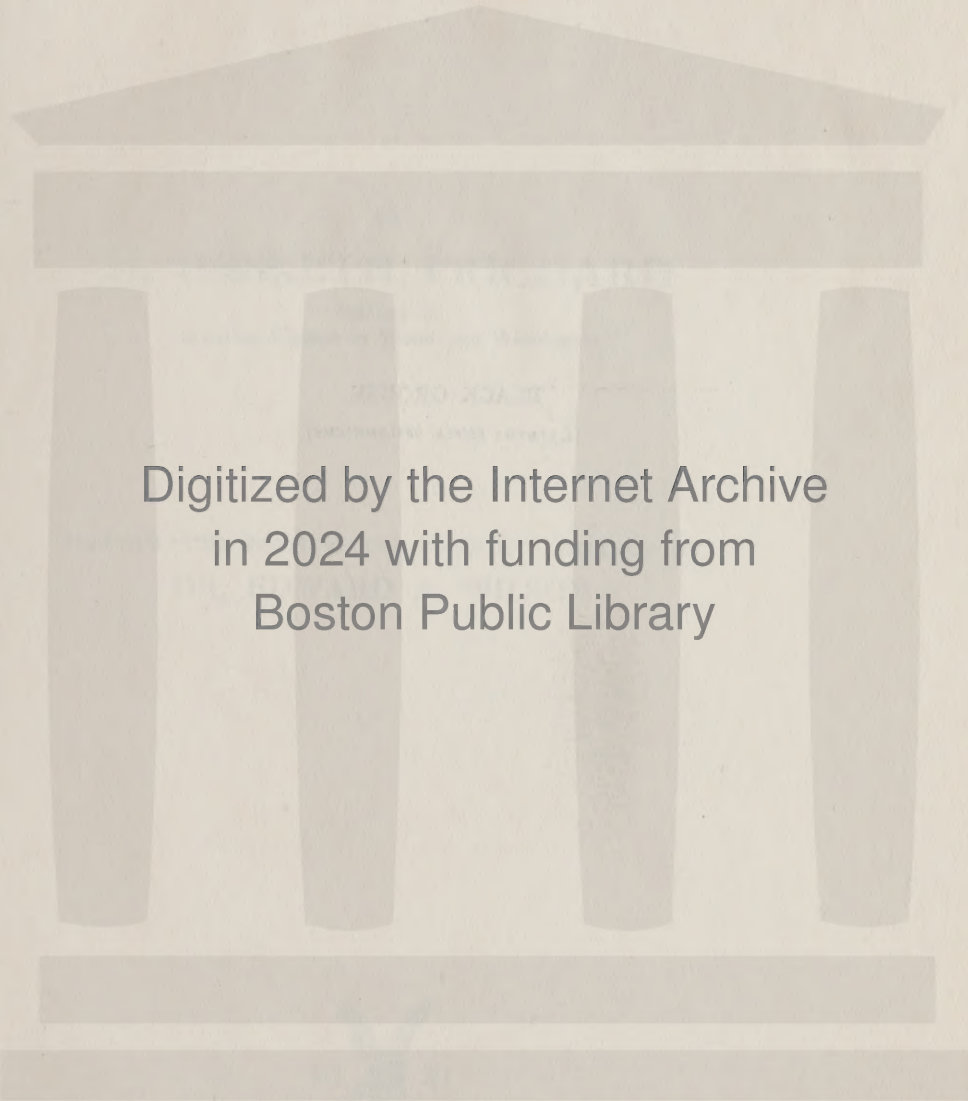
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BLACK GROUSE

(*Lyrurus tetrix britannicus*)

SPORT IN WILDEST BRITAIN

BY

H. HESKETH PRICHARD

Author of

"Hunting Camps in Wood and Wilderness"

ILLUSTRATED FROM WATER-COLOUR PAINTINGS BY

DR. EDWARD A. WILSON



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TO THE LATE
REGINALD JOHN SMITH, K.C.
OF SMITH, ELDER AND COMPANY
THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED
IN SINCEREST LOVE AND RESPECT

NOTE

THE paintings of Dr. Edward A. Wilson which illustrate and beautify this book are some of them unfinished sketches.

It was always understood that Dr. Wilson should illustrate this book, a scheme which was very near the heart of my friend the late Mr. Reginald Smith, but Dr. Wilson lies with his comrades in that eternal silence which no man breaks.

I need not recall that march to and from the South Pole. Pressed down by every kind of ill-luck, by continued bad weather, by blizzards, with everything against them, the deeds of those who took part in it stand out in the clear cold Antarctic light. Captain Scott, Wilson, Oates, Bowers, and Evans—their names can never die.

The pictures stand, I think, extraordinarily high, and I would wish this book to be looked upon rather as a tribute to Dr. Wilson's genius than in any other light.

My thanks are due to Mrs. Wilson for affording me the chance of giving to the world these illustrations by one whom I shall always consider as among the very first of bird illustrators.

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THE GREY SEALS OF HASKEIR

I

“ And in the light the white mermaiden swam,
And strong man-breasted things stood from the sea,
And sent a deep sea voice through all the land.”

Idylls of the King.

THE grey seal (*Halichoerus grypus*) is the largest of British mammals, that is, of course, provided we omit the whales. He is indeed a glorious brute, living upon and around the most inaccessible rocks and skerries, or on the Pembrokeshire and other coasts, in gloomy caves. If there is anywhere a rock upon our western or north-western coasts, many a sea-mile from the mainland and exposed to the full battering of the Atlantic, it is more than probably visited by grey seals.

Such a spot is Haskeir, a rocky islet so difficult of access that during more than five months, every day and night of which we were ready to start at any hour, we only succeeded in landing upon it twice. Those two landings were worth the trouble and the waiting.

Since that time it seems to have been my fate to see a great deal of the grey seals both in the Outer Hebrides, in the Orkneys, off the coast of Donegal and at another place in Ireland, which I will not particularise, lest some unworthy being, carrying murder in his hands, visit it. I have also met and pursued the *grypus* in the Fro Islands off Trondhjem in Norway, and have seen his big dog-like head excite terribly the Eskimo of Labrador.

But here it is my wish and my intention to deal with the grey seal as he appears in Scottish waters.

First of all, then, few people realise his bulk. He may attain and even exceed ten feet, and his weight turn the scales at six hundred pounds, and even more. He goes by a variety of names—Atlantic seal, sea-horse,

sea-bear, horse-head, the great seal, the Haskeir seal—and to him or rather to his female we owe the origin of the mermaid legend, and perhaps the lines which head this chapter. Everywhere along the Celtic fringe, upon our uttermost western coasts, recurs the story of the woman who dwelt with the seals and the awful curse that fell on him who incarnadined the waves with her blood at twilight. Here is the tale as told by an unlettered Irish fisherman. “They say there’s been no luck in that family since Con shot her from his boat on a spring-tide, and at night when the sea is black there’s men and women will tell you they hear the crying of her, for she gets no good burial in the shallow sea.”

Scott makes reference to the great seal. In the “Lord of the Isles” we find the lines :

“Rude Heiskar’s seal through surges dark
Will long pursue the minstrel’s bark.”

And in a note to one edition of the poems the following :

“The seal displays a taste for music, which could scarcely be expected from his habits and local predilections. They will long follow a boat in which any musical instrument is played, and even a tune simply whistled has attractions for them.”

I tried on several occasions the effect of music on seals, and no doubt it is among the many things that arouse their easily awakened curiosity. But being no musician the critical faculties of the seals may have been offended : at any rate I met with no great success.

The subject of the grey seal is one instinct with poetry and legend, and I will write on it as fully as I may in the hope that here and there will be a reader to whom my halting words may bring back or suggest something of their existence on the ultimate Atlantic rocks and isles. After all, it is unlikely that even the few will do more than visit the haunts of the grey seal, whereas I have lived and slept for a week at a time upon the rocks on which they breed, and have watched time and again the sudden emergence of the bear-like head, a rock-cod gripped firmly in

the incurved yellow ivory of the huge teeth, and seen the great bulls doing battle for their females, challenging each other with their bellowing and most mournful cry.

The beginning of my acquaintance with the grey seal was made through the rifle, for when Mr. J. G. Millais was writing his book on British mammals, a complete series of grey seals in their different pelages was necessary. The British Museum could not supply the want, being themselves almost entirely unprovided, so, having an adequate excuse, I hunted *Halichoerus grypus* far and wide.

Any of the species, save a mighty bull, has for years now been safe from my rifle. But it is a fact that the fair stalking and killing of a really big bull on the rocks is quite as difficult a form of sport as shooting mountain game, and the recovery of the trophy is always uncertain, for rocks are small, tides rise, and seals are slippery; also, bad boatmen are undeniably obstacles to success.

II

The first grey seal that I ever saw was upon the rock, Lagan Maskeir, off North Uist. We had approached in a boat with all the caution that we could drill into the lobster-fishers who owned her, and after a crawl over limpet and seaweed we reached a point of vantage on the low flat rock. In front among a medley of boulders, which are covered at high tide, were exposed some acres of weed and pool; on the farther side of these and across a narrow channel a single seal was lying upon the outermost skerry of Lagan Maskeir. Accustomed as I was to the aspect of the common seal (*Phoca vitulina*), the bulk of his mighty cousin, now seen for the first time, fairly amazed me. As a matter of fact, he was not a very big bull, certainly not above seven or eight feet in length, but he must have weighed more than twice as much as the largest common seal, which rarely exceeds six feet in length or weighs over 200 lbs. This seal before me may have weighed 400. But it was only for an instant that I had opportunity of observing him, for, disturbed by the Gaelic voices of the lobster-fishers, who were backing their boat from the rock, he plunged into the water, and when he appeared again his

head made a mere blot upon the sapphire surface of the sea. Here he was joined by another seal, but both were so wild as to render an approach within 300 yards impossible.

No doubt the seals, which, during the months of July, August, and September, haunt the vicinity of such skerries as Maskeir, Lagan Maskeir, and Sgeirleir, repair to the larger island of Haskeir in October and November to bring forth their young. All the grey seals upon that part of the Uist coast come from one or other of the great rocks in the Atlantic, from which they are driven in the mating season by the gigantic bulls who rule there. Tremendous fights take place between the males in August, and there is every evidence to lead one to believe that some of these combats terminate fatally. Young males, when shot at this time of year, often show the most appalling wounds, and are no doubt forced to leave the main rookeries in numbers. Sometimes they attach to themselves wandering and roving females, and with them pass the late summer and early autumn; but it is certain that the latter all return to Haskeir or some other island to bring forth their young, since the grey seal puppies are unable to swim for a fortnight or more after birth, and during this time are kept above high-water mark by their mothers. A rock which is never covered by the tide is therefore a necessity to the breeding mother, and at such periods the seals ascend the rocky elevations of Haskeir to as great a height as eighty feet above sea-level.

It is at this season of the year, while the young are helpless, mothers nursing, and the big bulls often lying with their families, that the annual "clubbing of the seals" takes place. The island of Haskeir is the property of Sir Arthur Orde, Bart., and he has made strenuous endeavours to put a stop to this iniquity; but Haskeir cannot be policed, and when, at the instance of Sir Arthur, the Uist men abandoned the clubbing, a boat's crew from Harris visited the rock and carried on the disgusting work of destruction. Considering that the grey seal as a race is slowly but surely advancing along the road to extinction, it is a matter for regret that the Government do not afford them some protection. For our British seals are outlawed, and may be slain in any manner or at any time of the year. No doubt seals are a nuisance near a salmon river; but even so, ninety-nine of every hundred which visit such places are

of the common and not the grey variety. The grey seals hold to the open sea; and surely these splendid animals have a claim to fair treatment. Unfortunately, however, they have not votes, and the sprinkling of men who wish to club them have. So if a Bill for the protection of grey seals were brought forward, it would, in all probability, be strongly and successfully opposed by some political genius who knew no more of our largest mammal than his secretary could digest in a half-hour's hunt through the encyclopædias of the House of Commons library.

The annual clubbing has been described to me by many witnesses. The visit is made in the month of November, if the weather permits, which, happily, it did not in 1912. The crew of the boat quietly land, the passes to the sea are blocked, and a savage slaughter with clubs and staves becomes the order of the day, or rather of the night. Rifles and guns are rarely if ever used, as their discharge disturbs the rookeries. The seals are hit at the root of the nose, and the first, or at any rate the second, blow should kill. If it fails to do so, my informants tell me that the skin swells up with suffused blood, and one might as well hit an india-rubber ball with the club for all the injury that can be done after the appearance of the swelling. The exact number of seals killed at these annual butcheries is large. That thirty-nine were killed in one year and forty-seven in another and forty-three in a third is a statement made upon various, but closely corresponding, evidence. The value of the seals is not great, there being no large demand for the skins, though the oil is put to various uses. An annual average of at least thirty or forty seals are destroyed on Haskeir alone.

From every point of view this clubbing of the seals is regrettable. It is indeed little more than a senseless slaughter, undertaken at a time when by every rule of decency, not to speak of sportsmanship, the poor beasts should be free from molestation. Probably nothing that any one may write will ever raise enough indignation to get a Bill passed through Parliament even in these days of "speeding up" legislation by gag and guillotine.

Haskeir is not the only place at which an annual clubbing occurs. There are several other rocks or islets round our coasts where the seals are done to death. And there is also this fact to consider: that, in some

cases, more than half the animals killed have been left behind to rot upon the rocks. Of forty seals killed twenty may be adults—the male, as has been said, may weigh 600 lbs., the female well over 300. Taking 300 lbs. as an average weight of the adult seals killed, and not counting the slaughtered innocents, we get a weight of 6,000 lbs.—a cargo of slippery shifting seals. Sixty have been killed over and over again. How many of the sixty carcasses have ever been taken to the mainland, as the attacking party usually go in one or at most two small boats? Of course it may be said that the skinning of the seals might be done upon the spot. This is absurd, as the seal is a terribly difficult animal to skin, and two good skinners have the work of a whole afternoon over one carcass. It is possible that, in some cases, the skins and the blubber alone are taken, but as a rule a clubbing crew will not remain upon a rock, such as Haskeir, for longer than they can help. A squall in those latitudes comes up very quickly, and the delay of a quarter of an hour might sometimes mean a perilous embarkation. No, the annual clubbing of the grey seals, as it is carried out in Great Britain at the present time, is a blot and disgrace upon the humanity and civilisation of those who take part in it and of those who by their lethargy permit the thing to continue.

There is something intensely pathetic in the idea that the grey seal will return—in ever-dwindling numbers it is true—year after year to the blood-stained ledges whereon his ancestors, his relations and his offspring have for decades, and even for centuries, been done to death. All the rest of the year he gives man small opportunity to hunt him with success, but in this one month, betrayed by the necessity of the needs of the new generation, he falls a prey to the crudest of methods. Often and often, as I have turned away from an easy chance at a grey seal, because the recovery of the animal's body if killed was doubtful, I have thought with bitterness that, in all probability, the beast was destined to be an item in the bag of some future clubbing crew. Enough of it! It is a very painful subject. But no doubt the grey seal would have been practically extinct many years ago were it not for its best friend, the west wind, which again and again prevents the clubbing parties from landing on the forlorn Atlantic islets, so that sometimes three and

four years pass and the lesser breeding-places remain unvisited. This, and only this, is the reason that the grey seal continues with us to-day in any numbers. If clubbing were made illegal the loss to the islanders would be small, as the skins are worth at most but a few shillings apiece and the oil not very much more.

III

The rocks, or rather the two separate groups of rocks, known as Haskeir lie exposed to the full force of the Atlantic, some seven and a half miles north-west from Griminish, the north-western extremity of North Uist or the Long Island of the Outer Hebrides. Between the two groups is a channel of the sea about a mile in width, and the five bare grassless rocks which compose Haskeir Eagach, or Little Haskeir, are all divided by deep water. The grass-topped cliffs of Haskeir Nameul, or Great Haskeir, rise to a hundred feet above the sea, and upon this rock or island scarcely half a mile in circumference is a spring of fresh water.

“The derivation of Haskeir,” writes Mr. Erskine Beveridge, in his admirable work on the historical monuments of North Uist, a book which must always remain the standard work on the subject, “is obviously Norse representing haf-skér or deep-sea skerry.”

The one end of Haskeir, the Reverend Donald MacDonald of North Uist informs me, is according to local tradition known as Ottair’s Castle, and the other end as the walls of Crimmon’s House. He adds that, although it is impossible to establish the historical identity, or even existence, of either Ottair or Crimmon, yet local opinion favours a Norse origin for the name of Ottair and allows him to be the mythical Odin, husband of Freyja.

Old writers do not deal with Haskeir seals at much length, though the following amusing passage appears in Martin’s *Western Isles*, 1703 :

“The Popish vulgar in the islands southward from this eat these seals in Lent instead of fish. This occasioned a debate between a Protestant gentleman and a Papist of my acquaintance. The former alleged that the other had transgressed the rules of the Church by eating flesh

in Lent; the latter answered that he did not, for, says he—‘I have eat a sea-creature which only lives and feeds upon fish.’ The Protestant replied that this creature is amphibious, lives, creeps, eats, sleeps, and spends much of its time on land, which no fish can do and live.”

The same writer has a few sentences which refer to the seal-clubbing :

“The clubbers,” says he, “always embark with a contrary wind, for their security against being driven away by the ocean, and also to prevent them from being discovered by the seals, who are apt to smell the scent of them and presently run to sea.”

There is no shelter between the western Uist coast and Newfoundland, and the winds blow there as they rarely blow elsewhere, so that for many days after our arrival on the mainland Odin’s Isle—I like that mythical derivation—remained unvisited, until at length one morning just before dawn a red-capped lobster-fisher threw pebbles at my window to awaken me and, when I rose and looked out, shouted to me the one word “Haskeir.” An hour later we were aboard the huge stone-ballasted boat and taking turns at the sea-oars to row her over the oily swells. She progressed through the water as a saw makes its way through knotted wood, and over our heads the northern sun beat down through the thin atmosphere and awoke decaying odours from among the stones at our feet.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, Haskeir became enlarged. As we approached it, and while still five or six miles off—for we had started from Scolpaig, a thirteen-mile row—the rock was wrapped in a mirage which made it seem to hang two hundred feet above the ocean. At length, however, the slow monotonous rowing was abandoned, for a slant of wind blew up out of the east and helped us considerably upon our way. Before it died down, we were within a mile of the main rock, and now with word and gesture we impressed the necessity of a silent approach upon the red-capped lobster-fisher and his mates. They agreed, in voices that rang across the water, and we made for that point of Haskeir Eagach from which, if the approach be noiseless enough, a shot may be obtained at the seals basking upon a flat rock which lies at its foot. But when we arrived, the rise and fall of the swell, although by no means great, caused the inevitable outbreak of Gaelic gabble, and a thumping

and smashing of the boat-hook against the rock. In another moment we leaped ashore, but not before the seals were all in the water.

Of the tragedy that occurred next there is no need to write. Suffice it to say that my companion went very near to getting a magnificent bull, which he shot, and which, had it not been for the amazing incompetence of the boatmen, he would certainly have secured. Later in the day, having spent a long period in watching the seals, which held to the surf on the Atlantic side of the island, my companion shot a six-foot male upon the main island. As I hoped to visit the rock again I took the precaution, before leaving, of washing away the blood from the place where this seal died. After which we set forth upon our long and wearisome return to Uist.

There can be very little doubt but that on this occasion my companion would have retrieved one of the splendid animals which he shot had the boatmen been of the most ordinary calibre. But they were terrified of the rock; and, even in our irritation and anger, it was amusing to see how much more cheerful men they became when their boat's nose was once more pointed towards the Uist dunes.

My next visit to Haskeir was paid about a fortnight later, and for it I had the good fortune to secure the services of a really admirable set of boatmen. This time we started from Houghary, and after running out of the rather dangerous channel between the reefs at the mouth of Houghary Bay, headed off for Haskeir in fine style. It was a very calm day and we had to row every mile of the twelve; not once was there wind enough to fill our patched brown sails. Still as the weather was (and indeed as it had been during the two previous days), the swell had not subsided and was quite heavy as we neared Haskeir. In face of the same conditions, the red-capped lobster-fisher and his mates would have denied the possibility of landing. Not so the Houghary men. There was one among them, Donald McClellan, quite the best seal-hunter I have had to do with in the Hebrides.

With him at the prow, the boat was manœuvred to the point on Little Haskeir where we had landed on the occasion of our previous visit. Here, without pause, he sprang on to the rock, where a moment later I was beside him. The crawl up was under cover and quite easy, and on the

top of it I raised my head by imperceptible degrees until I could see the flat rock upon which I hoped to find the fathers of all the Haskeir colony asleep. There was the rock, full in sunshine, but not a seal upon it.

"They haf been frightened, they haf gone!" said Donald. "Perhaps they shall be found on Haskeir Na-meul. When they are killed there, they come here; when they are killed here, perhaps they go there."

So we entered the boat and rowed across the mile that separates Little from Big Haskeir. On the main rock we effected a beautiful landing, and Donald and I crept along its surface until, among the puffin holes, we found a pinnacle of rock from which to spy. The boat had gone into hiding. Silence reigned, save for the occasional outcry of two great black-backed gulls which circled and laughed fifty yards above us.

In seal-hunting the tern, the black-backed gull and the oyster-catcher prove terrible thorns in the side of the stalker. The curlew often give the alarm; but so restless are they, and sometimes at such a distance do they fly before the approach of danger, that their warning passes unheeded. The black-back and the tern swoop and scream above the stalker, their shrill anger an advertisement to all and sundry that all is not as it should be. As to the oyster-catcher, he is of all birds the most persistent, and will follow the intruder upon his domains, hovering within ten feet of his head and screaming his alarm and disgust with hardly a moment's cessation, literally for hours.

But black-backed gulls, if you give them time, will often transfer their attention elsewhere. Besides, they frequently swerve and laugh over their prey or their food, and thus discount their power of communicating uneasiness to other creatures. In the present instance, Donald and I lay still, and in about a quarter of an hour's time the gulls swung away. The wait was not unpleasant, for the sun struck warm and I had plenty of opportunity to spy the beaches and bays on the shoreward face of Haskeir for seals. This is always a long business, as the rocks are dark, uneven and gloomy; and sometimes a seal will go upon them, or even upon some ledge of the cliff of Haskeir itself at high tide, and remain there until the tide rises again and lifts him off it once more. In the black shadows of the cliffs which surround these

ledges a seal is very nearly indistinguishable, at least this is so if he is of the black-coated variety, or even of the marbled. But on this particular day the telescope disclosed nothing, and when the gulls had ceased their clamour we crossed the central chasm of Haskeir and were almost immediately aware of a fine bull seal which had risen quite unconscious of our presence near the rock. After looking about him lazily for some moments, he dived again, and I ran at once to the spot where I thought he would appear, while Donald signalled the boat to be ready to pick up the seal should I succeed in killing him.

Having now killed, and seen killed, a very large number of seals of many different kinds, I am of the opinion that the length of time for which the bodies will float after death depends entirely upon the individual seal and the exact position in which he may be swimming when shot. A seal rising or, one might say, standing perpendicularly in the water, nearly always sinks at once; whereas a seal which may be killed when swimming horizontally, or in manlike attitude, will, if killed instantaneously with a shot in the brain, very often float in calm water for five, and in some cases as long as ten minutes. The amount of air in the seal's lungs at the moment of death probably has something to do with its *post-mortem* buoyancy; and it is a curious fact that the Eskimo of Labrador, at any rate, will shoot a seal in almost any position with every chance of recovering the floating body. But some of them say that the grey seal, which is not very uncommon on that coast, is more apt to sink than other species, which include the Greenland, the bladder-nose, and our own *Phoca vitulina*. This question, however, of the buoyancy of instantaneously killed seals is one upon which generalisation is rather out of place, as it is very rare that two hunters' experiences are the same. My own idea is, as I have said, that a horizontally swimming seal, killed quite dead with a shot in the brain, *after* it has had time to fill its lungs with air—for it must be remembered that if the shot is fired the moment that the seal appears after a dive its lungs will be empty—will usually float, and sometimes for as long as ten or even fifteen minutes. This is mere personal experience. I have heard of seals floating for half an hour, but have never seen this happen.

In the present instance the bull grey seal or *grypus*, as I have come

to call him, rose within fifty yards of the rock and began to swim very slowly along in the most favourable possible position for a shot. The boat was out of sight of the seal, but I could see the men ready to pull to the spot the instant I gave the signal. Donald must have lain down, for he was nowhere to be seen. After the seal had been upon the top of the water for some seconds, I fired. The brain of a seal lies very far back, almost though not quite as far back as that of a walrus. On this occasion the shot, which was a very easy one, was successful, and I do not think that the seal could ever have felt the swift and merciful passing from life to death. Donald bounded to his feet and waved his ragged cap in wild gesticulation, a strange figure against the gaunt and gloomy backgrounds.

The boatmen, in answer to his signals, plunged their oars into the water and came like a champion four-oar towards the spot.

“We haf him ! It is all very good !” screamed Donald—or that is what I took him to mean, for half his sentence was in Gaelic.

Meantime the seal rocked gently in the swell, which here was very slight, and the crimson patch about him grew ever wider. I had run down to the nearest point, a ledge some ten or fifteen feet above the sea. Had I not been certain that the boat would retrieve him, I would have taken no chance, but have jumped in, swum to the seal and held him up till their arrival. But Donald assured me that the seal would float, and I was pretty certain of the fact myself; also I had no change of clothes, and it was a case of jumping in “all standing,” since the time necessary to unlace a pair of shooting-boots would enable the boat to come up. And so the golden opportunity passed away. The seal had sunk a little, but I verily believe would have floated for five or six minutes more when the boat drew alongside. The captain of it, a man well used to seals, shot out his hand; but at the same moment a well-meaning member of the crew seized the boat-hook and, instead of bringing the boat to the seal, attempted to bring the seal to the boat. I shouted in horror, as I saw the wood of the boat-hook thrown across the body of the seal. Donald, too, raved on the rock. But it was all too late. The voice of the captain came up from the boat. “I had him, I had him by the hand !” And then the boat backed away and

there began a period of useless staring down into water a hundred fathoms deep. At this moment the voice of Donald :

“There is another seal ! Shoot ! Shoot ! Shoot at once !”

But as the seal which I had killed had disappeared, a resolution had formed itself—never again would I shoot at one of these glorious creatures as he swam in the deep water. I had seen five killed and four lost. Unless I could shoot them on the rocks I would never again fire a bullet at a seal of Haskeir. So the seal which had showed itself, and which looked like a three or four year old, was permitted to depart. Then once again the boat went out of sight and I lay upon the eastern cliff of Haskeir and watched the seals sporting in the surf below. Although they were at no great distance, a shot at them, as they raised their huge heads in the crashing swell, would have been a criminal folly. They were not much disturbed though rather uneasy, as, though the shot had been fired towards the other end of the island, it is not many hundred yards in length.

I had a splendid opportunity of watching the grey seals fishing and feeding, and one which at any other time I should have enjoyed more ; but on this early afternoon, the loss of the bull, which lay dead upon the sea-floor of the Atlantic, had produced that sense of utter depression which the loss of a fine trophy coupled with the useless destruction of a fine life inevitably inspires. And this I could not shake off either then or during the homeward voyage. One thing I determined. I would yet kill the grey seals I desired, but I would either shoot them on the rocks or in shallow water, if a haunt of the *grypi*, where the water was shallow, existed round the British coasts.

During the rest of that season in North Uist there was never a day calm enough to land on Haskeir again, and from a couple of visits to Lagan Maskeir a clean rifle was brought back ; for although seals were seen, they were out in the deep water.

After this a number of years passed during which I was fortunate enough to discover in Ireland a haunt of grey seals such as I had dreamed of, but naturally enough the desire to kill a specimen on the scene of my disappointment remained strong. It was this, in part, which took me back to the Hebrides twelve years later. I went there in August in the

sure hope that one day, during that month or September, the weather would permit me to land again upon Haskeir Eagach. But the good boatmen were gone and even the lobster-fishers had departed, and although I made arrangements with their successors, the weather was never, in their eyes, favourable enough to allow of the venture. Certainly it was an extraordinarily stormy year—so stormy that about the time of the annual fights, when the seals mate, the parties of males driven from the island rock came farther in-shore than usual. Thus it was that, for the first time within the memory of man, numbers of grey seals came fishing round the bays of the Uist mainland, a state of things of which we took advantage.

One day early in September, on a calm morning, following three or four days of equinoctial gales, a friend ¹ and I went to a mainland bay in which I had seen several small *grypi*, but none large enough to shoot, a week or two earlier. A point of high duneland, ending in a promontory of rock, formed one horn of this bay, and gave shelter against the winds from the west and north. It was from this vantage-ground that I had seen the small seals. We made our way to this promontory on the morning in question, and lay down while still afar off, on a sandhill, from which we used our telescopes.

“ I see three seals ! ”

“ I see four ! ”

“ I see five ! ”

“ One looks like a *grypus* ! ”

“ And a bull ! ”

“ He is a bull ! ”

After that it did not take us long to get across the intervening turf-land and stubbles and out upon the high bald dune, above the bay.

Here once again the telescopes were brought into play and, after five minutes of careful spying, the exact situation became clear. There *were* five seals, all of the grey species, at a distance of from one hundred to two hundred yards from the beach. Of these, three were small animals, while two looked like mature specimens. The large white spots upon the neck and breast of one of these larger animals shone in the sunlight, while the other was of the black or marbled type, it was difficult to tell

¹ Capt. A. C. Gathorne-Hardy, who died gloriously leading his men at Loos in 1915.

which, for when their skins are soaked with sea-water both colours look very much alike. There was no time to be lost, and A. and I tossed for first shot, the coin falling in my favour. We then stalked round to the sandhill lying nearest to the rock on the beach from which we had decided to fire. Here we paused for some moments, as the seals were not making long dives and seemed to be quite undisturbed. There was now a distance of some eighty yards entirely devoid of cover which we must cross, but in order to do this without being seen it was obviously necessary to wait until *all* the seals were under water at the same time. This, of course, was precisely what did not occur; and at last, as the seals seemed to be edging away from the land, we seized an opportunity when the only seal on the surface had the back of his head towards us to run down to the edge of the water. Arrived at the rock, I put over the safety bolt of my rifle; and as I did so one of the small seals rose within twenty yards of me. As we were well hidden and the wind was favourable, he did not perceive us, and after him the seal with the white-spotted neck arose about a hundred yards out. I was thinking that I had better shoot at once when the large black-headed one came up also. To shoot at either, when both were up, would have ruined my companion's chance of a shot, and while I waited for one of them to dive, I saw a figure show for an instant above the skyline about half a mile away. Now on that morning we were expecting G. to arrive from Oban and had left our man David at the house with instructions to bring him down to join us at Seal Point.

Although we were very well hidden, to G.'s eternal credit be it said that he espied us, and realising that he was on the skyline, and might be visible to the seals, lay down at once. Soon the spotted seal dived; and after waiting an instant I fired at the big black fellow, and put the bullet through his brain. At the point where I killed him the water was not above fifteen feet in depth and the wind was right on to the shore, so that I felt an agreeable certainty that we would succeed in picking him up. This feeling grew stronger and stronger as I realised that he was floating beautifully and drifting in-shore. But after the one glance at him, I turned my attention to await the reappearance of white-spots. A. was nicely in position before two of the smallest seals rose

almost simultaneously, and one (getting the wind of the blood from the carcase) dived with a resounding smack. Then farther out the large head of white-spots appeared, bobbing up and down on the swell. The seal was in a standing or tread-water position when my companion's unerring bullet entered its head. It sank at once, but in an even better position (as far as depth of water was concerned) for ultimate recovery than mine.

As we had no intention of shooting any of the other seals, we rose from the rock in time to see David, who had begun to strip with cries of delight the moment my seal was killed, come racing across the sands and rush into the sea. Meantime the black seal was drifting steadily in, although the water had nearly closed above it. The gallant David reached and seized it by the flipper and dragged it to the nearest rock. It was a bull and measured 7 feet 5 inches from the nose to the end of the flippers in a straight line, and just under 8 feet when the tape was taken over the curves. Having hauled this seal up the sand to a spot above high-water mark, we next turned our attention to A.'s. Although it had sunk almost immediately, the wind being right on-shore and the tide rising, we had every reason to believe that it would not take very long in drifting ashore, unless it should chance to become wedged under a rock. Even in this event its recovery at low tide, with the aid of a boat, was almost a certainty. So—very pleased with our good luck—we went off to get a cart in which to take the seals to the house.

On our return with a commandeered farmyard vehicle we found A.'s seal lying on the edge of the water. It proved to be a splendidly marked female 6 feet 11 inches or 7 feet 5 inches in length, according as the measurement was taken. I was unable to get the weight; but she was undoubtedly heavier than my bull, and it took the united efforts of four of us to hoist her into the cart. Her skin was one of the most beautiful ones that I have seen.

The temptation to swim for the seal which may have been killed or seemingly killed, at a time when no boat is handy, is sometimes very strong; but it is certainly an unwise and risky thing to do. I remember a case which occurred at the same spot that I have been writing of in the same year. On that occasion my wife had shot a nice young grey-

seal bull. The distance was fully 150 yards, and the approach and shot did her the greatest credit. The bullet (from a .275 Mauser) seemed to enter the brain; and as the shot had been well and coolly timed to the moment when the seal's lungs would be full of air, the animal floated splendidly. The water was not deep; but though the wind was favourable, the tide was falling, and A., with an instant and most chivalrous realisation that this was probably the first grey seal ever shot by a lady, only paused to tear off his coat before he plunged into the water. Being a powerful swimmer—clothes, boots, and all—he soon reached the seal; whereupon, as it seemed to be slowly sinking, the three of us on shore who had not gone in, but had contented ourselves with saying that A. was a fine fellow, began to aid him with shouted directions and advice.

“A bit to the left!” we all yelled in chorus, when the voice of the swimmer boomed out over the water:

“Yes, that is all very well, but the creature isn't dead!”

A. drew off, and the seal suddenly began to splash and wriggle; finally it disappeared. Not many hours later it was driven up quite dead upon the sands of the bay. The bullet had passed through both eyes. I think there can be very little doubt that a wounded seal would be an exceedingly nasty antagonist, and that to take any risks of this kind would be almost certain to end badly. A man could not survive a single one of the wounds such as I have seen inflicted by the gigantic ruling bulls on the bodies of the smaller Haskeir males.

As all seals killed in the water are shot in the head, there must be a considerable number of cases in which they are momentarily stunned, and it is from this fact that the danger arises. I remember with great distinctness the case of one enormous bull which was shot in deep water by a companion. As there was no hope of the boat reaching him in time, and my companion could not swim, I had begun to take off my clothes when the seal suddenly recovered and made off. It rose two or three times as it rapidly put half a mile between itself and the rock, nor after that did we see him again.

It is not a difficult matter, once one is sure that a seal is dead, to bring it ashore; for although it may be a very heavy animal it is easily supported in the water. This is nevertheless always a dirty business, as

the seal bleeds very freely and there is no swimming position in which it is easy to keep clear of the blood and oil. It is not a bad plan, if one makes up one's mind to swim for a seal, to take out a handful of stones and throw them at the carcase before approaching it too closely. Dogs can occasionally be trained to retrieve seals, or so it is said, and although my Labrador, Sinbad, will swim out to a seal and do his best to pull it ashore, yet, unless he is fortunate enough to happen to catch it by the flipper, he is very apt to drive the carcase under water in his attempts to get a hold of it. No doubt he could be taught to take a seal habitually by the flipper, but one does not shoot enough seals for this sort of fancy work. Still he did once fairly save a seal which would otherwise have been lost. This was a five-foot-long specimen of the common species.

The absolute lack of knowledge, or rather of accuracy, which is to be met with among fishermen and others who have spent their lives in seal-haunted waters is amazing. No wonder the statements on points of natural history obtained from such sources are regarded by many with scepticism. A Uist man, who certainly knew a good deal about seals, again and again stated positively that there were three kinds of seals in those waters : the Haskeir seal, *Halichoerus grypus* ; the bay seal, by which he meant *Phoca vitulina* ; and the offspring of the interbreeding of the two. The fact that the grey seal brings forth its young in November, whereas the common seal does so in May, and that the common-seal babies can swim at birth and those of the grey variety not for three weeks, made no manner of difference to this auburn-bearded student of the herds of Proteus.

From time to time I have seen it stated that seals can be killed with the shoulder shot. Once, in the days of my youth, I tried this shot at a common seal which was lying some five feet above the water, upon a rock. I am perfectly certain that the bullet sped true, but the seal reached the water and was never recovered. Again and again, in shooting stags, sheep, or any other game of the land, one sees an animal after its heart has been shattered by a soft-nosed bullet, gallop forward fifty yards from the spot where it was struck, and then collapse quite dead. This convulsive rush in the case of the seal upon a rock would certainly

enable it to reach the water, and once in the water a dead seal is hard to recover.

A seal should be shot through the brain, and, provided the right spot be hit, a solid bullet will do all that is necessary and will not spoil the specimen in the horrible way which is inevitable when an expanding bullet is used. As to the most suitable rifle for this sport, it is a very open question. Personally, I fancy a .256 Mannlicher; but anything in skilful hands from a .300 rook rifle to a .350 Mauser would not be out of place, although the last is unnecessarily heavy. In seal-shooting it should be an invariable rule never to fire until you are fairly certain, not so much of killing your beast as, should you do so, of recovering him afterwards.

It is, I think, quite a legitimate thing, and does no harm to the race, to shoot an old male when occasion offers, but those who pursue grey seals may expect hard work and little success. Fortunately many of the haunts of the *grypus*, such as Haskeir, the Scilly Islands, and certain favoured resorts in Wales, are in the hands of private owners, who protect them *as far as they can* with enlightenment and ability. But the crying need of the grey seal is legal protection and a close season, extending at least from the first day of October to the end of the year. We make game reserves at the ends of the earth, and we are very right to do so; but we forget or do not even know of the existence of this fine creature, which swims with ease through the breakers when the spray is flying over the hundred-foot cliffs of Haskeir, which does no harm, and which is yet outside the law and liable to be massacred under the revolting conditions I have described in the earlier part of this chapter.

NOTE.—The late Mr. Reginald Smith, K.C., and Mr. Charles Lyell, M.P. succeeded, after reading the above, in having a Grey Seals Protection Bill passed. This has, however, now lapsed, as it only provided for five years' protection, and the clubbing has begun again. Will not some M.P. take the matter up again?—H. H. P.

CAPERCAILLIE

CONCERNING the derivation of the word Capercaillie, there are differences of opinion so well marked as to claim the distinction of a controversy. With regard to the second part of it all are agreed. It comes from the Gaelic word *coille*, a wood, but the first offers to scholars opportunity for one of those differences of opinion which make up in bulk the fascination of philology.

Cabhar means an old bird, *Gabhar* means a goat; and in this connection it is interesting to note that *Gabhar-athar* = the snipe = the goat of the air, so called doubtless from its bleating cry; or *Cabhar-athar* = the bird of the air, in which case we get *Cabhar-coille* = *Capercaillie* = the bird of the woods. On the other hand the word *cabhar* is by no means idiomatic, and the noun has long passed out of use. The *Encyclopædia Britannica* has it “*Cabhar*, an old man, by metaphor an old bird, which is the old bird of the wood, the capercaillie.”

That is one view. The other starts at *Capull*, a horse; *capull-coille* = the horse of the woods. In *Desc. Reg. Scotiae* (1578) we read: “*In Rossia quoque Louquhabria (Lochaber?) atque aliis montanis locis non desunt abietes, in quibus avis quædam rarissima capercalze; id est sylvester equus vulgo dictu, frequens sedit, corvo illa quidem minor, quæ palatum edentium sapore longe gratissimo delinit.*”

To this derivation I personally incline, since, having weighed the evidence, as far as one ignorant of the Gaelic tongue may, I agree with him who wrote: “It is called Horse of the Woods because of its size, strength and beauty, as compared with other wood birds.” These seem good reasons enough; so let the mighty bird enjoy his high-sounding title.

The standard work upon the capercaillie is Harvie Brown's *Capercaillie in Scotland*, a book which it is safe to say will have its readers as

long as there are sportsmen in this country. Mr. Harvie Brown writes : " Of the occurrence of the Capercaillie in earlier historic times and prior to the extinction of the species in Scotland, there is not much to relate which has not been quoted ; " but after stating that the bird was known to the ancient Britons as *Ceiliog Coed*, he goes on to assign to Hector Boetius (1526) first mention of the species.

In *Old. Stat. Acct. of Scot.* XX. 473, may be found the following illuminating and delightful letter written by James VI. to the Earl of Tullibardine : " James, Right trustie and right well-beloved cosen and counsellor, we greet thee well. Albeit our knowledge of your dutiful affection to the good of our service and your countrie's credite doeth sufficientlie persuade us that you will earnestlie endeavour yourself to express the same be all means in your power ; yet there being some things in that behalf requisite, which seem not-withstanding of so meane moment as in that regaird, both you and others might neglect the same, if our love and care of that our native Kingdom made Us not the more to trie their nature and necessity, and accordingly to give order for preparation of every thing that may in any sort import the honour and credite thereof. Which consideration, and the known commoditie yee have to provide, Capercaillies and termigantis, have moved us very earnestlie to request you to employ both your ounne paines and the travelles of your friendis for provision of each kind of the saidis foules, to be now and then sent to us be way of present, be means of our deputy-treasurer ; and so as the first sent thereof may meet us on the 19th of April at Durham, and the rest as we shall happen to meet and rancounter them in other places on our way from thence to Berwick. The raritie of these foules will both make their estimation the more pretious, and confirm the good opinion conceived of the good cheare to be had there. For which respectis, not doubting but that yee will so much the more earnestlie endeavour yourself to give us good satisfaction anent the premises, as yee will do us acceptable service. We bid you farewell.—At Whitehall, the 14th of Marche, 1617."

Surely it calls for no great stretch of imagination to picture the Earl's " ounne paines " and " the travelles " of his friends. The caper was doubtless even then a wary bird and a lover of the high woods, nor

were the weapons of the day such as to command success. Doubtless the wild hunters who were Tullibardine's clansmen trusted more to snare than missile. This brings us to an interesting question. Were wild-fowl such as snipe and woodcock much less sophisticated in the days of yore of which we read when thousands were taken? Could such success attend a saner setter of to-day?

Another point of interest is raised by the letter of King James. Evidently the royal palate recked not of that "turpentina" flavour which would probably cause the modern "gun" to decline with thanks, in the unlikely event of his host offering to have a brace of caper "put into the motor."

Of course our ancestors had excellent digestions, and also were catholic in their tastes.

"Pages with ready blade, were there
The mighty meal to carve and share.
O'er capon, heron-shew and crane,
And princely peacock's gilded train,
And o'er the boarhead, garnished brave,
And cygnet from St. Mary's wave,
O'er ptarmigan and venison
The priest had spoke his benison."

This bill of fare gives good evidence of their capabilities, and it is highly improbable that capercaillies were absent from that groaning board. Except under the title "giant grouse" no one has (as far as I know) succeeded in putting them into poetry.

"And from the pine's high top brought down
The Giant Grouse, while boastful he displayed
His breast of varying green, and crow'd and clapp'd
His glossy wings."

The date—March the fourteenth—of King James's letter enables us to fill in the subsequent slaying of the capercaillies destined for the royal table. The messenger left Whitehall on the Ides and rode north. The birds which (we may suppose) arrived in Berwick on April 19th may or may not have begun to pair, but all shot or taken after almost certainly had, a fact which must have rendered the task of the Earl and his friends the easier.

The caper appears to have been welcomed as an addition to the Royal *menu* on another recorded occasion. From the *Black Book of Taymouth* : "To the Right Worshipfull, his much honoured friend the Laird of GLENORQUHY, this—much honoured Sir, Immediatelie after the receat of your letter on Saturday, I went and shew your capercailzie to the King in his bed-chamber, who accepted it weel as a raretie, for he had never seen any of them before.—(Signed) JO. DICKSON. Perth. the 3 of Februar. 1651."

The question of the distribution of capercaillie in the British Isles prior to their temporary extinction is naturally of interest, but it is also a matter upon which details are meagre. As early as 1528 they are mentioned by inference as existing upon the lands of the Earl of Atholl, and again in Taylor's *Visit to the Brea of Marr*, as existing there as well as in Sutherlandshire and other counties. It is also quite clear that the birds were to be found in some numbers in Ireland, but to attempt to define their range in the one country or the other would be absurd. Their presence is referred to by many writers of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries; but midway through the last the caper had become a very rare bird indeed.

The fact remains that in 1745 the last capers disappeared from Strathspey, and about the same time but a few were left near Thomastown in Tipperary. Roughly speaking, we may assume that in the year 1780 at latest (and probably considerably earlier) no caper "display'd his breast of varying green" in woods Irish or Scottish. In which country he lingered the longer, who can be sure? The evidence on this point is mostly that of authors who were born after the disappearance of the last of the capers.

Let us leave the old breed with a quotation from the Rev. L. Shaw, who goes more into detail concerning the caper than does any other early author :

"Caperkylie (called also Cock of the Wood); in Latin *Capricalea*, as if he infested the goats; but properly in Erse, *Capal-coil-ie*,—the Wood Horse, being the chief fowl in the woods. He resembles and is of the size of a turkey-cock, of a dark grey, and red about the eyes; he lodges in bushy fir trees, and is very shy; but the hen, which is much

less in size, lays her eggs in the heather, where they are destroyed by foxes and wild cats, and thereby the Caperkylie is become rare. His flesh is tender and delicious, though somewhat of a resinous fir taste."

So from the year 1760 until the year 1836 the caper ceased to be counted among the game-birds of Britain. During these years the shooting of two or three specimens is chronicled; but, as the best authenticated of these took place about 1810, it is more than probable that the victims were strayed imported birds. It is of course dimly possible that, somewhere in the rugged pine woods, a few brace may have survived, but we have no real evidence of the fact.

The reason of their extinction in Scotland and Ireland is purely a matter of conjecture. On this subject Harvie Brown writes :

"What appears to be the most likely factors were as follows : The probable destruction of great forest tracts by fire (evidence of the destruction of great tracts of forest country are frequently to be met with in early history. Thus to get rid of wolves, a large pine forest extending from the western braes of Lochaber to the Black Water and Mosses of Rannoch was burned to expel the wolves) . . . the cutting down of the same by man as late as the days of Cromwell, and the wasting away of the forests from natural causes. . . . It was not until the beginning of the eighteenth century that any large extent of young wood was planted, nor until the end of the eighteenth century that arboriculture became general in Scotland."

At which we may leave it, and, passing by the years when the Giant Grouse was absent from Scottish woods, let us trace the story of his restoration. During the first thirty years of the nineteenth century certain efforts were made to re-introduce the capercaillie. They failed. The birds, which were brought over from Sweden in very small numbers, did not thrive. In 1827 Lord Fyfe imported a cock and a hen. The hen died after reaching Montrose Bay. The year 1829 saw another importation of a cock and a hen at Mar Lodge. This time the hen laid twenty-four eggs—all addled.

And now we must let L. Lloyd, the author of delightful works on Scandinavia, tell the epic of a success in attaining which he was himself largely instrumental :

“ It is fortunate for the sporting world that the Capercali, after the lapse of more than a century, is once more included in the British Fauna, and I feel proud in having been a contributor in a small degree to so desirable an event. . . .

“ For a long while no one would move in the matter, but at length in the autumn of 1836 the late Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton, then recently returned from Taymouth Castle, where he had been much struck with the great capabilities of the woods for the naturalisation of the Capercali, took up the affair in good earnest. . . . ‘ Influenced by the desire, in which I am sure you will concur,’ so he wrote to me, ‘ to introduce these noble birds into Scotland, coupled with that of making Lord Breadalbane some return for his recent kindness to me, I request you to procure for his Lordship, at whatever cost, the requisite number.’ He at the same time placed his head-keeper at my disposal—no slight sacrifice for a Norfolk game preserver. It was, indeed, an onerous commission, as prior to this time it had been a matter of difficulty to procure even a brace of living Capercali in Sweden; but by distributing placards throughout the country offering ample rewards, and by instructing the peasants how to knot their snares so as not to kill the birds, my object was at length gained, and within a few months of the receipt of the Baronet’s letter, twenty-nine Capercali, followed up shortly afterwards by twenty more, were on their way from Sweden to Taymouth Castle, and with the exception of a single one killed by accident, all reached their destination in safety.

“ The arrival of this magnificent collection in Scotland created quite a sensation; every one was delighted that matters thus far had gone well. . . . In September 1837, not very long after the arrival of the twenty-nine, he (Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton) wrote me as follows:—‘ I have just returned from Taymouth, where I have been reminded of you very frequently by the Capercali. I saw eighteen of them in excellent health and plumage a few days ago; the other ten, six hens and four cocks, were turned out, and there is reason to hope that they are doing well—so that, thanks to your energy in collecting them, Larry’s care in bringing them over, and Lord Breadalbane’s anxiety for their welfare, our experiment is likely, I trust, to succeed; and Scotland to be re-stocked

with this noble bird. They are greatly admired by every one, and very deep interest is felt about them. . . . Nothing can surpass the woods into which they are to be turned out, and the protection they will receive,' the writer goes on to say; 'and as Lord Breadalbane's territory is so large, I hope they will not be disposed to leave such excellent quarters.'"

A letter from Lord Breadalbane to Mr. Lloyd dated five years later reads as follows: "I have great pleasure in informing you that the Capercali have thriven most excellently. The experiment of putting the eggs under the Grey Hen was attended with perfect success, and there are now a goodly number of these birds hereabouts."

Mr. Lloyd continues: "It is very satisfactory to add that the Capercali have subsequently flourished in the Highlands in an extraordinary manner. Less than four years ago, indeed (1862), Lord Breadalbane himself told me he imagined there were fully one thousand of these birds on the Taymouth property. His head keeper, moreover, in a letter to a friend estimated them at double that number."

Taymouth, however, although it was the first, was not the only point at which caper were re-introduced. They were imported at Tulliallan and at Lathirsk, but not into Arran, where a few birds have nevertheless been shot. In 1860 they were "put down" on the hills at Cortachy, where they have thriven exceedingly and seem to be still increasing. In October 1911, during the course of a short walk with the beaters of some ten minutes' duration through an outlying portion of the woods of Tullo Hill, we saw no less than eleven of the grand birds; and in the January of this year in driving the same hill about thirty were seen (or heard) by the writer, and probably double that number broke back. In 1856, or four years before the Cortachy importation, caper were observed at Lindertis, near Kirriemuir, thirty-five miles from Taymouth. Indeed it is from Taymouth that all the neighbouring country has been re-stocked, the birds have spread mostly east and south to a distance of fifty and sixty miles and even further. It is said by observers, that the wandering or colonising propensity is strongest in the hens, which sometimes suddenly appear and settle down in districts where caper are unknown. The cocks do not follow until a year or two later, with the

result that in the springs before their advent the caper hens nest with the blackcock. The hybrid is a beautiful and very pugnacious bird.

It is probable that every year sees an advance in the distribution of capercaillie, and though in their choice of abode they are very arbitrary, yet the rough rule may be laid down that they prefer and thrive best upon hillsides having a southern exposure. Their lines of demarcation are very clearly marked, and caper will live their lives within easy flight and sight of woods which they can never be induced to visit, and yet when the spirit seizes them they are great wanderers, as is proved by the fact that one was identified in Mansion House Road on the outskirts of Edinburgh in May 1876.

Having now traced the history of the caper from very early times, and having seen him flourish, become extinct, be re-introduced and flourish once more, let us consider him as a game-bird, an aspect under which I humbly submit that he is neither properly appreciated nor at all fairly treated.

For some reason the caper has been left as nearly outside the law as any bird not included under the head of vermin can be. He comes in, so to speak, with the crowd under the Wild Birds Protection Act, which allows him to be shot from August 1st to the end of February, thus giving him but five months' protection. This lack of protection is a sad mistake; for to permit the murder of caper fledglings in August is both senseless and short-sighted. The caper hen does not lay her eggs much before the end of May, and—as her period of incubation is twenty-six to twenty-eight days—the young are not hatched until the latter end of June. What then of the law that permits these immature birds to be shot on August 1st, when barely two months old? And what kind of sport do they give? Young unwieldy bodies rising slowly from thick undergrowth present marks which must either be let alone or riddled with shot. Of course I am quite aware that the fortunate owners or lessees who have caper on their ground do not permit this sort of thing as a general rule. They know too well what a difference a couple of months will make to that lumbering mass of feathers. Then he will be in beautiful plumage, and, dashing out above the pine trees before the beaters, he will probably give the gun who essays him as

sporting a shot as he can desire, and the chances are—more especially if the movements of the said gun are, owing to his position, at all cramped or confined—will leave him wondering how he missed so big a bird so clean and fairly.

But many people have leases of shootings which last only a couple of months; more still find it necessary to go south in September, and in such cases the caper sometimes fare badly. "I've paid for them," argues the lessee, "so, hang it all! I may as well have them," and so he does. But it is all a sad pity, and unquestionably a law should be passed protecting caper until the first of October. Against such a proposal would probably be arrayed the quota of keepers and game-preservers who believe in destroying caper at every opportunity. These people say that caper drive away pheasants and black game, and do great harm to the woods. In those allegations there is just enough truth to make them dangerous, and we will return to a consideration of them later.

By far the greater number of caper killed each year in Scotland are brought to bag when the woods are driven late in the year. It is usual to shoot both cocks and hens, and although on some estates this is a reasonable policy, upon others it is a mistake. In this connection everything depends upon the lie of the land of the estate. In most of the famous caper counties of Scotland there is a proportion of wild wooded land, clothing gullies and hillsides, which would not repay an organised drive. These places are practically sanctuaries to the caper, and where such exist both cocks and hens may be shot in the woods of the lower ground without damaging the stock too much. But where the woods are of small, or comparatively small, extent, and fairly easy of access, the caper must be shot in a very discriminating manner, or one fine October morning the owner will find that the birds are exterminated on his ground. The young caper—for all the strength he may later attain—is a weakly thing during his first months of life, and it is probable that the hen which rears three chicks to maturity is doing more than average good work.

In the vast forests of Norway and Sweden the caper seem to hold their own fairly well, notwithstanding the toll taken from their numbers

by a large variety of creatures of prey. The caper hen nesting on the ground has little chance of saving her brood from the keen nose of the wandering lynx. Also in Norway a good many caper are shot when the snow is deep. At this time of year a hunter on ski can cover a large extent of ground, and as he invariably fires from long ranges (Kristian Fiskum, the most skilful elk-hunter of the Namsos Valley, who annually kills a good many caper, told me that he rarely fired under one hundred and fifty yards) he can, by shooting the birds on the lower branches first, sometimes kill three or four without moving. But to do this a man needs to be a good shot. On the other hand, the woods of Norway are so vast and so continuous that they provide a splendid refuge. No doubt there are large quantities of caper in them, though I personally have never seen more than nine birds in a day. But the case of Norway is by no means on all fours with that of Scotland, and it is, I fear, a fact that the spread and increase of our most lordly bird of chase has been both hampered and damaged by the actions of the ignorant and the narrow-minded.

It is deeply to be regretted, for what an addition the chance of shooting a caper makes to one's enjoyment of a good day's driving of some dark wood of the North! Not long ago I found myself on a high hill facing such a wood. The snow was on the ground, and all day we had been occupied in driving the pheasants, the roe, the caper and the ground-game which inhabited it into the last beat. Below me I could see the next gun perched on the sheer of the hillside attempting to kick himself a footing, nor was he, so far as I could judge, succeeding very well. Above him towered the wall of the wood, and I was trying to calculate the distance a bird would have to travel between coming over the wood into his sight and its attainment of the angle behind him at which it would be impossible to shoot. It was not a long space, giving hardly time for a snap-shot—no more—and I must say that, looked at from my standpoint, the dash of the caper *cocks* over this space seemed to constitute as difficult shooting as I have seen. A woodcock and the pheasants flashed out fast enough, but the caper cocks were quicker far. Once upon the same hill at the same drive, taken, however, at a different angle, I saw three pheasants coming wide of the guns, when a caper

cock rose behind them. On that occasion I could not make out as they approached that the caper was the faster, but over the valley between the twin hills the flight of the larger bird was certainly more direct and swift and purposeful. The caper is a magnificent bird, well worthy of all the law in both senses of the word that we can give him.

I remember one day, to be marked for ever with a red underline in the game-book of memory. There was snow on the Norsk hills, not deep, but it was freezing, and a cold wind was blowing in the isolated edges of the forest. One outlying gulley—so my hunter told me—generally held an elk. As the travelling was very noisy owing to the frost, I instructed him to go round and drive the place, as it was probable that any animal which might be disturbed would seek the lower levels rather than face the gale on the heights. Meantime I found a fallen tree, a fir, behind which I ensconced myself. The time was late afternoon and the sun was giving its last lights to the desolate upland world before sinking behind the forest. It was very, very cold. Looking ahead I saw a raven rise from the woods that were being driven by the single beater, and go swinging down the wind. A long wait followed, and then one by one three cock caper rose, at first small as bats against the white backgrounds, but developing as they came into enormous black fowl, which whizzed by me so close that I could see the red in their eyes, and even the startled optics themselves. Later, another hustled out of a pine and followed them. I had nothing but my rifle, and no wish to shoot at any game save elk, but I rarely think of capercaillie without seeing again that chill Norwegian sunset and the great sudden birds looking so large that they might be such fowls as Thor hunted on his journey through Jotunheim.

I have sometimes heard sportsmen (not themselves averse from fledgling-shooting in August) speak with scorn of the methods of caper-shooting so popular in Austria and other continental countries. As is well known, the caper cock, which is polygamous, flies in the early dawn to the pairing ground and there utters his *spel*, or love-song, and at the same time puffs out his plumage and makes a brave challenge. It is then that the hunter attempts to approach him. The finest description of what occurs is undoubtedly that given by the author of *The Game*

Birds of Sweden, and since for clarity and picturesqueness, as well as correct detail, the modern may not hope to compete with it, I shall quote :

“ He (the hunter) should be there,” we are told, “ by the first dawn of day, when the Woodcock begins to *rode*, and the shrill notes of the Woodlark (*Alauda arborea*, Linn.)—hence called the *Tjäder klockan*, or the Caper-cali-watch—are heard in the forest. Here the man listens in profound silence until he hears the spel of the cock, then, for the most part, perched on or near to the top of a pine. Sheltering himself as much as possible, behind trees and other cover, he stealthily approaches the bird; but, owing to the imperfect daylight and the thickness of the wood, he is often unable to see it until close upon it. So long, however, as the first and second notes, *knappningen* and *klunden*, last, he must remain stationary, and, if in an exposed position, immovable as a statue. But when the bird’s third note, *sisningen*, commences, which, as said, continues only a very short time—and in the while the bird is all but blind and deaf—he takes three or four steps, or rather strides, in advance, when he again halts. Should all remain perfectly quiet, however, the bird almost immediately recommences its spel, and, when it once more comes to *sisningen*, the man, as before, moves forward several steps; and, by thus alternately halting and advancing, he, at length, arrives within gunshot of the Capercali, whose fate is then soon sealed.

“ The Capercali during its spel is very watchful; and the fowler must, therefore, be exceedingly guarded in his movements whilst thus stealing upon it; and, at such times as the bird is heard, although not seen, he should of all things avoid looking about him. Want of caution on the part of the fowler in this matter has saved the lives of many Capercali. Its eye, indeed, is said to be so piercing as more readily to discover the face and hands of the man, if they be uncovered, than his person; and some, therefore, deem it advisable, not only to wear gloves, but to hold down the head.

“ The fowler should also be careful never to advance until the *sisningen* has actually commenced, for an old Capercali cock that has previously been persecuted will, perhaps, when one imagines it is on the very point of beginning the last-named note, suddenly stop in its

spel; and, if one then advances, will most assuredly take wing. When again the man halts after the *sisningen*, it should be in an easy position; so that, however long he may have to wait before the bird recommences its spel, it will not be needful for him to change it for another.

“During the early part of the spring, when the cock carries on his spel quite alone, he runs the greatest risk of his life; but when, at an after-period, he is joined by the hens, they act the part of his guardian angels. On the least appearance of peril, they, to put him on his guard, utter a peculiar kind of cackle; and should this not suffice to attract his attention, one or other of them will straightway fly past the tree on which he is perched, and at times so near him as apparently to strike him with the tip of her wing, which unmistakable hint he cannot but comprehend, and, as a consequence, moves off at once ‘in the wake’ of his kind monitress.

“Happily but few hens, comparatively, are shot at the *Lek-ställe*, partly because they are more wary than the cock, but chiefly, I take it, owing to the fowler having other and better game in view. Indeed, were a proportionate slaughter to take place amongst them, the breed, in parts of Scandinavia, must soon become extinct. As it is, the cocks are so ruthlessly shot down during the pairing season that a large proportion of the hens are unable to find mates; and hence the number of barren birds (*Gall-Hönor*) one meets with in the forest. Were people to refrain from killing the cocks until the spring is well advanced, and pairing for the most part over, no great harm would be done, and they might still have ample amusement; for the cocks, especially the young ones, continue, they say, to spel until the middle of May, or it may be even longer.

“The number of Capercali—of the cocks I speak—that a man may thus kill at the *Lek-ställe* within a given time depends greatly on circumstances. If, for instance, the weather be boisterous, or there be a crust on the snow, which in the more northern parts of Scandinavia often remains on the ground until late in the spring, it may happen that even the most experienced chasseur will hardly kill a single bird in a week; but under favourable circumstances, on the contrary, a good deal may be done. I myself have known more than one man to shoot from

five to six of these birds in the course of the morning and evening of the same day—but one or two is a more usual number. A peasant in the interior, however, who knows what he is about and devotes much of his time to the purpose, as many do, will probably kill from fifteen to twenty cocks in the course of the spring. I was, indeed, assured by an acquaintance of mine, who resided in the heart of the Wermeland Finn Forest, that one particular spring he shot no less than twenty-nine. This, in a country where nearly every one carries a gun, will give some idea of the havoc that is thus annually made amongst these noble birds.

“In the northern parts of Scandinavia the Capercali is generally shot at the *Lek-ställe* with a small pea-rifle; but in the south the shot-gun is almost universally used for the purpose.

“Though the Capercali is so large a bird as to be thought impossible to miss, it nevertheless not seldom escapes the fowler, even though provided with a shot-gun. Several causes contribute to this. In the first place, it is usually very dark when one fires; secondly, it is not always that an unobstructed view of the bird can be obtained; and last, ‘a good dose’ is required to bring it to the ground.

“Accidents, and those of a serious nature, sometimes occur at the *Lek-ställe*; for when, at early dawn, the fowler is stealing on the Capercali in a bent position, a brother sportsman similarly engaged may take him for a bear or other wild beast, and send a ball into his body, many instances of which are on record.”

As a matter of fact, even in the days when Lloyd wrote the above spirited account, caper shooting at the *Lek-ställe* was contrary to law in Scandinavia; but at the present time the sport (for sport it undoubtedly is) has been brought to a high pitch of excellence on the estates of other continental countries. There the cocks, having been persecuted upon their pairing-grounds for generations, have developed an extraordinary acuteness of sight and hearing, so much so that British, as well as most native sportsmen, rank the caper very high as a quarry, not so far indeed behind the stalked deer and chamois, and above either of these animals when obtained by the watching of some mountain pass to which they are driven.

Certainly no great harm is done to the stock of capercaillie provided

that shooting is not carried to extremes (as it never is on well-managed estates) until late in the pairing season. Provided this rule be rigorously observed it is difficult to imagine any more adequate way of killing off the old cocks; and if a light rook-rifle be the weapon used, the hunter will find that he deserves any bird he is fortunate enough to kill. There is, of course, a natural feeling in the Briton against shooting any bird during the spring, but it should always be remembered that the old cock-caper is a polygamist and the very reverse of mindful of any parental feelings. He probably does not even remember where the nests of all his wives are placed. In any case it must be acknowledged that he who with a .250 rifle shoots a caper in the pine-dusk of the early dawn as the noble bird breaks into his ecstasy, is responsible for a far better and more praiseworthy action than he who puts an ounce and sixteenth of No. 6 shot into a skinny fledgling flapping from a bed of bracken only to fall into it again, unfit for food and slain long, long ere his prime.

BLACK GEESE

To touch for a moment on a personal note. In an experience of sport which has extended over varied portions of the world—some of them in its wildest and most remote regions—I frankly own that the sight and chase of no beast of plain, forest, or mountain has raised in my consciousness a more vivid sense of romance and delight than has the sight of geese flying out of, or into, the cloud-wrack of our British skies. The sound of the wind about the dunes and that most arresting clamour of geese, grey or black, flying over sea-girt isles, drowning the piping of lesser fowl, seem to have virtue to stir some nerve of recollection which pulsates with an almost poignant sense of pleasure. No doubt the cause of this is to be found partly in heredity, in the descent of the spirit of some woad-clad marshman or estuary-dweller, as partly in the fact that a first wild goose shot at fifteen marks a far more notable epoch in one's life than a first bear slain in early manhood.

There are still in these British Isles, or rather in the seas around them, many small islands, generally an outcrop of the dunes of the mainland, which the bernicle geese have used, some as resting-places, some as feeding-grounds, for such time as the memory of man runneth not to the contrary. From their arrival in October or November, right up to an early Easter, the gaggles haunt these isles, arriving regularly to the clock each evening, departing to the minute in the morning, for in spots—and fortunately there are many—where these geese are not disturbed, the premature darkness of a stormy evening does not much affect their time-table of flight.

One spring, I camped for a week upon an islet perhaps an acre and a half in extent, and situated a few miles from the western Irish coast. Upon the Atlantic side, no land broke the force of the gales until, two thousand miles away, the grim headlands of Labrador, Capes Harrison

and Harrigan, frown down upon the frozen sea. I had gone to this islet to try to get a specimen of *Halichoerus grypus*,¹ but on the first night a storm arose and blew away the roof of the earthen hut in which I was sleeping, so that I awoke with a mouthful of peaty dust and got up to have a look round outside. Never shall I forget the surprise I received—and gave. I had slept for several hours, my fire was long since out, I had no companion, not even a dog, the hut was merely a kennel of a place tunnelled in a mound by some fisherman, and years previously used by him as an occasional summer residence. Doubtless the isle had appeared untenanted to a vast flock of bernicle geese, some three or four hundred strong, which were standing and sleeping up to within five yards of the door when I stepped out among them. In the moonlight, I could see the eyes of the nearer geese in that infinitesimal portion of a second before the air was rent with the noise of wings and tongues. The geese circled once and pitched upon the farthest rocky margin of the isle, where I could hear them talking and complaining until, having concluded thorough repairs to my roof, I once more went to ground. In the morning they had all collected upon a strip of grass at the extreme north-west corner of the island, and there they stayed within a hundred and fifty yards of the hut until nearly eight o'clock, when they departed north. That evening, and upon all subsequent evenings while I remained upon the isle, they returned, but never again did they venture upon the central plateau of grass, but always stuck to their quarters upon the north-west spur. I never molested them, but I had my reward, for I could take a good look at them through the glass before emerging from the hut; but the moment I put in an appearance they flew off.

It is worthy of note that they never had a definite sentinel, though generally not more than half the flock were heads down feeding or sleeping at the same time. Probably they had not been shot at on this island at any time, and had come to regard it as a sanctuary; and there is no bird more conservative than the wild goose—black or grey.

A point which I first noticed on this occasion, and which the weighing-machine has since confirmed, was the extraordinary difference in the size of individual bernicles. Many old birds weigh $5\frac{1}{2}$ or even 6 lbs.,

¹ The grey seal.

BRENT GOOSE

(*Branta bernicla*)



while others, also full-grown, scale as low as 3 and $3\frac{1}{4}$ lbs. This disparity is very apparent when one watches bernicle geese feeding at close range.

There can be very little question that bernicle are more easily driven away from a particular haunt than are either greylags or pink-footed geese. I have had reason to draw this conclusion at times when I have had the good fortune to shoot over ground where both bernicles and greylags were to be found. During one February week we visited such a spot three times. On the first occasion we saw over four hundred bernicles, on the second not half that number, and on the third a single bird, while the numbers of grey geese remained approximately the same.

Some days of the finest goose-shooting I ever enjoyed, I owe to the kindness of Mr. J. D. Beveredge, who owns an estate in North Uist. The first day that I went over, I was accompanied only by an attendant, John, the ghillie of a shooting where I was staying, in another part of the island. We spent a very pleasant day spying out the land, and, apart from an abortive stalk after a gaggle of some seventy greylag geese, were content to do no more than use the glass.

The island of North Uist, of which the interior is dotted with innumerable lochs, large and small, comes at this its north-western extremity to the headland of Griminish Point. Following the coastline to the east, the land recedes, forming the deep bight of Vallay Sound. Vallay itself is the largest of the islands in this Sound. There is a small loch upon it, but for the rest it is made up of the knolls and hollows of sandy dunes. On the day in question we did not cross the Sound, a strand not unlike that of Holy Island, and passable only at certain stages of the tide. We spent our time among the heather of the mainland, where a couple of lochs gave safe harbourage to companies of widgeon. At these no shot was fired for fear of disturbing the greater game, and after the failure of our solitary stalk, undertaken among the ruins of a deserted croft, the only geese we saw winged their way to the safety of Gaskeir, and as evening fell we drove our seven miles home through the curlew-haunted dusk, while once, somewhere beneath the stars, a flight of wild swans passed over us.

It was a few days later before my friend, the laird, again drove me

over. On the way, we saw many widgeon and seven whooper swans, besides, on the strand at Vallay, widgeon, mallard, and innumerable representatives of the wader family. On arrival at Vallay, we had but a hundred yards to drive up to the house of the factor. This house overlooks the strand, and near it there is a hollow in the downs, perhaps eight hundred yards by six hundred in size. Never in Britain have I seen such a sight as this area presented on that February day. To the north of it, not half a mile away, five grey geese were feeding on the short grass, and perhaps eighty yards from them eleven bernicles were intent upon the same purpose, on a stubble. At some distance farther on another flock of bernicles, over a hundred strong, formed but an outlying party to a vast body of three or four hundred. As we watched them, John remarked: "There was a minute when I was thinking it was sheep."

We descended from the trap and shook hands with the factor. The laird explained the purpose of our visit, for, owing to the tide, the letter announcing our coming had not arrived.

"There are the geese," said the factor; "they have been there this three weeks." Whereupon he introduced me to the ghillie, Norman McClennan, and forthwith we made our plan of campaign.

Of all the geese within sight on the landscape, only the eleven bernicles were in a stalkable place. McClennan said that the best way would be for one of us to go with him and stalk these, while John and the other made a detour to a high point nearer the eastern end of the island over which the geese, when disturbed, would probably fly. The laird, with his usual generosity, insisted that I should take the stalk, and then set off with John for the spot which McClennan had pointed out, while the latter and I incongruously started our stalk by creeping along under the wall of the farmyard and passing through a cowhouse. After this, the ground hid us from the geese, and a detour of a few hundred yards brought us in at the back of the amphitheatre of downs where they were feeding. Here a depression ran up between two knolls, and up this McClennan signed to me to creep. I did so, and then very carefully raised my head, expecting to find myself within easy shot. A cautious spy, however, revealed no birds, so I crept back and then

forward again along another similar depression, which ran parallel to the first, until I was able to peer through the bents at the eleven geese, now within fifteen yards of me. They were all together, and a shot in the middle of them, even with a 12-bore such as I was carrying, would have been very killing. As I showed my head, the eleven rose and bunched together. I picked two outside birds and scored a very easy right and left. Had I fired into the brown, I might have done twice or thrice as well. All the geese within hearing rose at once, but to the great surprise of McClennan and myself, pitched again very quickly. They had no idea where the shot had come from—that is, except the eleven—and from their four or five hundred throats rose a babel of sound as they discussed matters in their feathered parliament. I was very much astonished to observe that the five grey geese pitched among the bernicles, for never before had I seen these wildest of all British birds take so short a flight. Norman now suggested that I should go down and conceal myself under a bank of turf on the far side of the new position taken up by the geese, which he pointed out to me. By doing this, he said, I should probably get a shot at the geese when he drove them over, as he would try to do as soon as I reached my place. He said also that I should probably flank them in, and increase the laird's chances of a shot. I now crept back upon the line of my stalk, and, once safely below the skyline, ran as hard as I could back to the farm, where the factor very kindly took me to my place for the drive, and there left me. The geese were now within three hundred yards of me, and as soon as Norman showed himself, they rose and crossed about forty yards wide. My first barrel, which was loaded with No. 4, produced nothing but a rattle of shot upon the feathers of an enormous gander, but the No. 1 in the second knocked him out of time. The others flew on, but passed wide of the laird on the hilltop. We watched them grow less as they winged their way towards the mainland, and then spent the rest of the day upon the western end of the island, where a seaweed-gatherer had reported several flocks of grey geese. We saw them, but were unable to come to terms at all, and finally drove away, after promising to return two or three days later for a second trial of cunning.

This we did, but I will spare the reader an account of the day. It will be enough to say that it was most successful, and remains a joy in retrospect. We secured two grey geese and seven bernicles, once stalking right up to the latter and killing five with four barrels. Nine wild geese to two guns is a good day for the Hebrides, or indeed anywhere else in the British Isles. Larger bags have been made, the record for North Uist being, as I was given to understand, eleven to one gun. These included six brent geese, and the gun was an 8-bore. In South Uist twenty-one have been killed in a day by two guns.

Personally, I have never used anything larger than a 12-bore, an ordinary game-gun, with which to shoot wild geese, and as long as my sport is undertaken for pleasure—and for what other purpose can it be undertaken within the limits of civilisation?—I shall certainly not use anything heavier than a 12-bore, though, were I to do much goose-shooting, I should use the long-chambered variety. The essence of sport is surely enjoyment, and the satisfaction of a successful flock shot with an 8-bore is rather mathematical than artistic. Of course, one has killed two, three, or even eight duck or plover with one barrel, but not often. Again, I have fired occasional shots at the central bird of a flock and with the inevitable result, which is cruel. No doubt, fair sport entitles hunter and hunted to equal chances, and there is also little doubt that wild geese usually have ninety per cent. of the odds in their favour. But as I grow older, the more strongly do I feel that the fair right and left at geese, as at lesser fowl, is the ideal to which the well-armed modern shooter should strive. Bags will be small perhaps, but there are places where even so they will not be always empty.

Of the power of a 12-bore to kill a goose cleanly and fairly at thirty yards, I have no doubt at all; but at forty your shot must be large, unless you hit him right in front. A bernicle also will succumb to blow that would merely hasten the departure of a greylag. The upland goose of South America is a bird of about the same size as the bernicle, and an ordinary 12-bore and No. 4 shot was most satisfactory in bringing him to bag.

There are, of course, wide flats where the chances in favour of the

fowl are ninety-nine to one, and this fact of heavy odds led to the introduction of the punt-gun. Shooting afloat is, in some of its aspects, perhaps the highest form of sport pursued in the British Isles, and, where the fowl are approachable in no other way, it is legitimate. Yet, after a successful shot, there must necessarily be a number of birds hit which are never picked up and never recover; not more, however, even after the most successful cruise afloat, than in a day's pheasant-shooting or grouse-driving. The shot-gun is cruel—we cannot avoid that conclusion; it remains with sportsmen to make it as little so as may be. But apart from these ethical considerations, my idea of sport does not consist in carting about an 8- or 4-bore and seeking with it the family shot.

Less is probably known of the bernicle than of other geese. On the east coast it is very rare in most parts, loving as it does the grassy isles of the west. It is in fact a bird remembrance of which is inseparable from the wetting rains and vivid greens of the wild Atlantic shore. The gaggles often rest, or when disturbed seek safety on the wide strands of estuaries, but, where the bernicle is unmolested, it loves the dunes. This preference, which it shares with the greylag, makes it the delight of the shore-gunner; for what is more fascinating than the splendid walking and stalking afforded by the dunes? I remember once, when stalking geese with a friend, hearing him remark: "What a glorious spot this would be if it were golf links!" A horrible thought! But on a windy day it would certainly be possible for the driver of a ball over that scented earth to land it among an outlying flock of startled bernicles. But with golf would arise the concomitant hotel, and the geese would vanish from the land, only to be seen flying high on their way to some Avalon, some far island of the waves. In March and early April, the bernicle becomes a tamer bird. In these months there are certain cattlefolds in the Hebrides which they frequent regularly.

Very different from the bernicle, those true friends of the modestly armed wildfowler, is the other variety of black geese—the brent. They are to the shoulder-gun enthusiast infinitely the least approachable of all the goose tribe. Their habitat is the margin of the tide, where they find the *zostera maritima*, in which their anserine palates delight.

They are our latest arrivals; January is their month, and from then onwards till April they are usually, if not always, to be seen in favoured localities, a black line or phalanx well out, a mile or more from any cover. The brent never comes inland; rarely does he desert the area washed by the tides. The sandbank and the tide-rim form his kingdom, and thither must the fowler go to seek him. He is a small, wideawake, and most interesting goose; but so far as the game-gun fowler is concerned, his habits make him completely master of the situation. To stalk him is usually impossible, to drive him is to court failure; the only way in which the 12-bore can bring him to bag is to make use of the infrequent occasion when he sits beneath the shelter of some reef or isle, and even then nine stalks in ten prove abortive. The occasions are few and far between when he makes an error of judgment and pays the penalty, but such errors are sometimes made owing to the formation of the ground, and the presence of suitable cover for his enemy. For the most part, he can count on immunity save from the punt-gun.

Few sea-fowl or water-fowl will fly over the land if they can by any means reach their destination by flying over water, but a careful study of the lines of flight adopted by brent does sometimes result in success of a kind—a thin success, and one where the payment is as sure as retribution. The brent may die, but the fowler will pay for it in rheumatism, and when the fires of youth are quenched, most gunners will vote the price of mastery too high. Still, he is a worthy quarry, this little black-headed fellow with the slaty wings, who breeds up within the Arctic circle and is only chased thence by Kabibonokka, the mighty Wind of the North. Not one, of the many thousands that come to these shores, falls to the shoulder-gun; and of all the tens of thousands I have seen, fourteen only have been prevented by me from returning to those solitudes of Nova Zembla and Siberia, which are the cradle of their race.

Nevertheless, occasional successes remain most pleasant memories, though none so much as the first, attained twenty years ago while still a schoolboy. It was totally unforeseen, when one January afternoon I waded out through a quarter of a mile of cold English Channel to a skerry, over which the curlew often flew. The change of the tide was

right, and I had fired several resultless shots at these birds. I know now that I had moved too soon and taken the birds too far out. They saw me and twisted, as only a scared curlew can twist, and then winged on their way, making the bay re-echo with their loud complaints. The tide had almost left the skerry on which I lay, when I saw a flock of a dozen birds flying low towards me. They passed a hundred yards wide, but I was quick to speculate as to whether they might not be geese. Turning, I watched them pass on until, as they faded against the winter background, another lot, hitherto unobserved, passed a little wider. My disappointment soon faded and was replaced by wild eagerness, as I became aware of two more birds heading, as it seemed, straight for me. I ground my face against the rock, my heart beating with a fury of hope. They came on, but, seeing the skerry, swung to pass wide of it. They were flying almost together, quite low and perhaps fifty yards wide, when, deliberately swinging a suitable distance in front, I fired both barrels. One brent flew on, the other fell. I leaped to my feet, mad with delight, only to see the goose, which was winged, head seaward. Gun in hand, I waded in, firing as soon as I could re-load. The goose dived, rose again farther out, and we went on in this way until the water was up to my middle, and most of my cartridges, save those I had in my gun and one in my breast-pocket, were wet. The sea became gradually too deep; the brent ceased to dive and paddled slowly out. I returned to shore and watched him till he was shut in by some rocks, then ran home, a distance of about a mile and a quarter, for a dog. I do not know how long it took to cover the ground, but it was all too long for me, divided between hope and fear, for to secure that goose seemed to me the one great event likely ever to happen in my whole life. The dog—I did not think so then—was a bad dog. He was a handsome spaniel, and on land he would lift no bird though he would bite a rabbit, but from water he would retrieve. The tide had receded a great way, and, studying the wind and set of the currents, I was soon upon a rock searching. The suspense was not long. Almost at once I saw something floating far out, and I knew it for my goose, and, glorious fact, it was floating belly-up and dead. It was near a quarter of a mile away, but, running round to the

nearest skerry, I was within two hundred yards. I now urged the dog to take the water, which he did, but after swimming fifty yards or so he came back. Urged on afresh, he again went in, and up to the limit of my powers I guided him with stones, but he returned once more, barking as he came, while I cursed him by all my schoolboy gods.

During this time the goose was drifting slowly out. So, tearing off my coat and waistcoat, I caught the dog to my bosom, and carrying him thus plunged in. The water grew deeper by degrees, and it was probably very cold, but I never felt that. Within a hundred yards of the goose, the sea was up to my shoulders, and from here I expelled the dog from me towards it, as a man-o'-war launches a torpedo. He swam a little way, turned and made for shore. He was neither sulky nor unwilling, only obtuse and bored. Having retrieved the dog, I expelled him once more and then groped on the bottom for a stone. It was my one chance. The dog would swim to where I threw a stone. I had to duck deeply for it, and then, wringing the sea-water from my eyes and nose, I waited while the dog swam half-heartedly and pessimistically forward until, just as I thought he was going to turn, I threw the stone. With an access of slightly renewed interest, he swam on. He was now within fifty yards of the goose. I ducked for another stone and failed to find one. I was aware of the miserable dog in the act of turning. I plunged my hand into my pocket and pulled out a two-shilling piece and a heavy metal cartridge extractor. I hurled the latter towards the goose; the dog turned and swam a little forward, and then suddenly he saw the goose itself. A moment or two more and his mouth had closed on it, and not many beyond that before I had taken it reverently from his jaws. In the cold early dusk I walked home, my whole soul flooded with that peaceful satisfaction which we know not too often. As I went, I remember I praised the dog, but in the back of my mind I foresaw dogs of the future which should be worthy of picking up geese. As I write, the dogs are lying beside me, and they have retrieved geese and strange fowl beyond my wildest dreams, but the feeling that long ago flooded my soul has never again quite reached that first tide-mark. Youth has its own wisdom—a wisdom that can see but one thing, and see it so largely that it covers the horizon; but we lose that wisdom as

the years go on, and however keen the joy of sport may remain in a man's mind, we think also of politics or the Stock Exchange or love or ambition, and the height of early feeling is never touched again. Well, here is a lot of talk about a very ordinary incident.

There is another opportunity that the brent geese give to the resident fowler, but which is of little interest to the sportsman. In my own small experience I have only known it occur on the eastern coast of the island of Jersey, where there is a fine stretch of *zostera maritima*. On two occasions there, newly arrived brent allowed me to approach within shot under conditions which in ordinary circumstances would have been condemned to certain failure. These birds seemed utterly weary after a long flight; and on another occasion a farmer, with a fifty-shilling 12-bore gun loaded with five drams of black powder and large shot, killed five geese at a shot. This man was a friend of my youth, and I remember the gun well. It had skelp or "sham-dam" barrels, its maker preserved a beautiful anonymity, for nowhere was there engraved upon it any hint of its origin or his responsibility. Its mere possession would, even when loaded with ordinary charges, have put up any one's life insurance premium to a high percentage. How it ever got rid of the ten drams of powder without killing more than the geese is hard to say. However, it did so, and the fame of the shot reached Gorey upon the north, and Pontac upon the south.

There is a method of shooting brent geese which is not much followed save by the truly keen, but which, if any man even occasionally adopts it, stamps him at once as a true sportsman—that is, using the word in its sense of a confirmed lover of lonely pursuits when the odds are vastly, almost absurdly, in favour of the quarry. This method consists in sinking a tub in some mudbank, and, after ensconcing oneself in it, either shooting the geese if they fly over it or near it, or, more exciting far, remaining therein while the geese come in upon the edge of the advancing tide.

It is lonely work, of course, but the shooter to whom loneliness is abhorrent will never make a fowler. Indeed, one might go farther and say that he to whom loneliness is not refreshing, who does not feel exalted and uplifted by contact with desolation, had better stick to the

company of his kind upon moor and stubble. How many men are there of cheery disposition, the good fellows of clubs, talkers at breakfast, who, when faced by such conditions, change into magnets of silence and gloom! Once, on a shooting expedition in Canada, a man, having left the last house where it was possible to obtain an illicit glass of beer and plunged into the green and spruce-scented, but nevertheless curiously massive, silence of the Canadian forests, exclaimed, "Never would I go into the woods alone! It is like stepping into an icy bath. Even with pals it is oppressive, but, alone, it makes me shiver!" How different is it with the lover of desolate places! To pass into the lonely woods, to feel the silence enclose and enfold him, to face the wind and smell the rain, raise in him a sense of physical well-being and of mental tonic that has no reaction.

However, we are wandering rather far from the barrel sunk in the mud and sand of the estuary, where the brent geese feed beside the tide-bubbles. Come with me and we will visit it. First, be it understood that the barrel, if it lies in dry sand, must be sunk two or three days before it is used, else the newness of the upturned sand stands out in advertisement of something not as usual, and the geese regard the unusual as the to-be-avoided, and will certainly give it a wide berth. But let us imagine that all is as it should be, and that we are walking, gun in hand, over the dunes. We wear tweeds, rubber boots with at least two pairs of stockings in them, and in a sealskin bag we carry our woollies, for it will be very cold. A light oilskin is usually quite necessary, but this afternoon we have left it behind. The wind is in the north, the sky is covered with patches of light cloud, but no rain will fall, and if it snows the snow will be hard and will not cling. Our clothes are not very thick, because if the feet be warm there are colder places than a barrel, however fiercely the north-east wind may blow.

We arrive above the estuary. Let us sit a moment upon this hillock and spy out the flats with our telescope. You see that sandbank three-quarters of a mile from shore? It is upon the western face of that bank that our barrel is buried. Yes, just within a few yards of those oyster-catchers, or seapies. Let us sweep the flats. There are twenty curlew or so off the skerry, and at least fifty widgeon there by the tide,

and out farther, nearly two miles to seaward, a black line like a causeway of attenuated stepping-stones. Those are our quarry—brent geese, about a couple of score of them. They will be joined by others later. Come on! The sooner we get into our hiding-place the better.

We walk over the flats, the curlew move away with their alarming outcry, the widgeon are too far off to care—we may see them again later. We must not forget to shut out our movements from the geese; it would never do for them to see us suddenly disappear into the sand. Here we can get out of their sight naturally enough behind this rock. Now to the left! Here is our bank. We must approach it from the landward side; geese do not like footprints.

Ah! there is the barrel. No one would have suspected its presence, would they? In you get. Sit on that crossbar. It's a tight fit, so in the body I will leave you, though I'll remain in spirit. Your cap, fortunately, is a good colour. At its highest point, too, it is a few inches below the rim of the barrel. Already four o'clock! The tide has just turned, and the February evening is imperceptibly closing in; the wind has hardened to a gale, it drives little spurts of sand into your skin—you will do well to anoint your face with oil before you sleep to-night. Hullo! What's that? A mallard passed over within easy shot. You were quite right not to shoot. *Aut anser, aut nullus*, is the motto, though if the widgeon come in nicely, you'll need all your self-control. And now for an hour you watch the sights and hear the sounds of the winter shore. Many birds you see, and at closer range than ever you have seen them before. Oyster-catchers, curlew with their Sherlock Holmes noses, peewits, golden plover, and in flocks and companies the waders, which almost at all seasons touch these solemn sands with life.

And now let me explain the plan of campaign, such as it is, upon which your chances of a shot rest. You see the geese? Very well. They are almost on their last legs on that bank; in a minute or two now the advancing tide will cause them to rise. There are several banks to which they may fly, but usually they come here or go to that bank over there. You see it? It would have been worth while to erect some scarecrow on it, a handkerchief on a stick, but it is too late

to think of that now. Look! Look through the glass! They are beginning to be uneasy, and two fresh lots have joined them. They're up, by Jove! and heading this way. They've pitched. No, they have not. See, what luck! They're coming—coming right in! Now they're down—down right in front of us and only a hundred and twenty or a hundred and thirty yards away. Now the fun begins, and it *is* fun, isn't it? This bank is never quite covered in these tides, and if luck looks our way the geese will move up with the rising water until they are within easy shot. You see that white pebble? That is just forty yards away. You must let them pass that, and then——

Hullo! hullo! a little lot of a dozen widgeon have come in. There are four cocks among them, chestnut-headed beauties, the dandies of the tide. And now the water creeps up, the geese are within a hundred and twenty—a hundred yards. They look nearer? Yes, but they will seem to be right on top of you before you must fire. Close quarters with geese means dead birds. Five more minutes. Surely you will have your reward. Get ready! Oh, what *is* that? From overhead a hard, discordant break of laughter—arrogant, insolent laughter. It is the old black-backed gull, one of a pair that patrol the coast. He has seen you—the wretch—and is now informing the beach of his discovery. Up go the necks of the geese. Shoot? No, no! They are ninety yards away. There! They are off, and the old gull, the spoil-sport, is laughing like a villain in a melodrama. Well, well! Better luck next time. I told you your chance of success was about one in a hundred. The gull was one of the ninety-nine chances against you. We had better go; the twilight is falling fast, and far out at sea the first flash of the new lighthouse shines like sheet-lightning through the dusk.

Another goose whose visit to our shores has been recorded is the Canada goose, a splendid bird. I have never seen him in British waters save in the semi-domesticated state; but elsewhere, in Canada, in Newfoundland, and in Labrador he has many times rejoiced my eyes.

There was an occasion when a very curious incident befell me in which a Canada goose played a part. I was, at the time, in camp by the Terra Nova river in Newfoundland, up which I was about to start on a trip into the interior, and during the day I had seen many Canada

geese. Night fell, as wet and stormy as it can only be in England's oldest colony, and I was about to turn in, when a voice boomed through the darkness: "Is this my friend Prichard's camp?" A moment later, that most remarkable and able man, the late Judge Prowse, K.C., C.M.G., advanced into the circle of light. He was at the time between seventy and eighty years of age, but as vigorous as many a youngster would wish to be. He was clad in a thin butter-coloured suit, his neck and chest were bare, and his feet were thrust into a pair of easy slippers. The spot where I was encamped was on the river, and the Judge informed me that he had been down-stream looking after some salmon-poachers in the interests of the Government, and had not eaten for fifteen hours. It was ten at night, the day had been drenching wet, and he was soaked through. I and the woodsmen with me marvelled at the strength and stamina that enabled him to undergo such hardships. He was a man whose bodily gifts were only exceeded by his mental powers; and had his rôle in life been cast upon some larger stage, his natural energy and force would have had a wider scope, and he must have left his impress upon his generation.

Soon he was sitting before a roaring fire, clad in my "extra change" and eating a meal of trout and bacon. While we were talking together, I was suddenly aware of a curious noise behind me among the spruces. It sounded at first as if some animal were beating itself against the ground. "What is it?" I said.

"A fox or a lynx," was the Judge's suggestion.

I caught up a log of wood and hurled it in the direction of the sound. It ceased at once, and, picking up a brand from the fire, I went towards the place and presently came upon a young Canada goose. The log hurled at a venture had struck it on the head. I carried it back to the fire.

"A goose! a Canada goose!" cried the Judge. "It must have been attracted by the light of the fire. This is most interesting! I will write a letter to the papers telling the facts, and will send on a copy to the London *Field* the moment I get back to St. John's."

Later in the night the Judge departed, taking the train which passes through Terra Nova station, rather higher up the river. I went to sleep.

I awoke just after dawn to find a red-haired man regarding my camp with gloom.

"Have you seen my tame goose?" said he.

I explained exactly what had occurred, and, with many apologies, invited the red-haired man to dinner.

He accepted. At the end of dinner I said, "The Judge intends to write to the papers in St. John's and London about the singular attraction possessed by fire for wild geese."

The red-haired man smiled sadly. "It was a good goose," said he. "It would follow me about like a dog. Pass the whisky."

The letter of the Judge to the papers was providentially never written. When, on my return to St. John's, I asked him what he had done, he said: "I forgot all about it, my boy, but I'll write it to-night. You can take home a copy with you on the boat for the *London Field*."

Then I revealed the true story. The Judge was convulsed with laughter. "I'll tell that story against you in the *Cornhill*. It will please my friend, the Editor," said he.

But that letter also was never written. And now even his iron strength has not availed, and he has passed on through those changes which he never dreaded, for I believe he was one of the few men whose faith knew no fear.

“WHERE THE SNIPE DRUMS”

THE actual shooting of a stalked or walked-up bird, except possibly of a grouse, on the high tops in a strong wind, can never give the same satisfaction as that of the same bird driven. And yet some of the most pleasantly remembered dates in our sporting calendars have been spent walking up our game. Looking back on these occasions, it is never the individual shot that we remember, but the work of some dog, the happy fact that we were “on our day” and made a good average of cartridges to birds, or perhaps, and much more likely, it was the weather, the distant snowy hills, or the sight of some clear-running burn that has left its mark upon the memory.

Far be it from the writer to exalt mechanical proficiency with the gun into undue prominence. Few desire to become mere killing machines, and for such, at any rate, these notes are not written. But in recalling many days of pleasant effort, it has surprised the writer to realise how large a proportion belong to the impromptu-drive variety, when with three beaters and two guns, or more often with the beaters alone, one has attempted to outwit strange fowl—strange, that is, to the “gun,” to whom a goose is a goose and a duck a duck even though the latter be a red-breasted merganser.

In looking back a scene at once presents itself. It is a wild day, if ever there was one, and even the estuary upon whose shores we stand is covered with waves, the heads of which are blown clean off by the gale. Above us rises a bank of sand-dunes, and any one looking over this would discover a wide terrain of bents with here and there a pool. We are also within a quarter of a mile of the Atlantic Ocean, which just now is thundering on its strands. There are but two of us, myself and a ghillie, Dugald by name, a quiet man, prematurely white-haired in spite of the fact that his fortieth year is still nearly a lustrum ahead

of him. We have been out for about an hour, and up to the present have but a single teal to show for it. The teal was one of some forty which rose from the shelter of a jutting bank beside the estuary; they have flown on until lost to sight behind the high bank of the dunes under which we stand.

" 'They'll be on one of them bit pools likely,' " says Dugald. " 'I wadnae fire on the plovers or what-not till the teals is by. It'll tak' me twenty-thirty minutes to mak' ma circle and get on the ither side.' "

Without more words he goes and I am left alone. First of all I select a spot where a kind of terrace beneath the dunes gives me a six-foot wall of sand in front. Over this I can look as from a high grouse-butt. In the immediate foreground I have a field of fire of about forty yards, beyond which the view is blocked by a large sandhill. On either side of this I can see further where in a dip of the dunes the west wind is driving the sand and roaring in the hollows.

About twenty-five yards to the left, and all unconscious of human proximity, five golden plover are standing. For a moment I hesitate, for, as may have been guessed, Dugald thinks little of plover and much of teal. I realise, however, that Dugald has gone up-wind in order to walk round by the beach, and the explosion of a 9-inch howitzer would hardly reach him against the wind, which seems to increase in violence with every moment. Goodness, how it blows! Sweet and strong sweeps the breath of the Storm Gods from the green islands of the Atlantic. The plover are facing up-wind. I show myself and, as they rise, fire both barrels. Two fall to the first barrel, but none to the second, as they swerve. Then the three survivors turn and come straight over me down the wind. I have only time to shove in a single cartridge, and this I send somewhere well behind their tails in spite of all efforts to hold in front.

I reload and look round. The sound of the shots has stirred up the sheldrakes that must have been resting in a bay of the estuary. Their instinct is all for the open sea, so they fly by against the wind and within easy shot. I can see the beautiful markings of the cock very clearly, but I have not shot a sheldrake since I was a boy, and they pass unmolested. There is still a quarter of an hour or more to spare before

Dugald will be able to begin the drive. Five minutes pass, during which I see nothing but several hoodie crows and a herring-gull. Then two wild ducks, both mallards, as I can see through the glasses, fly in and settle off the estuary. They are a couple of hundred yards away, but may swim this way.

Now another and most unwelcome figure enters upon the scene in the shape of an old seaweed-gatherer, who evidently intends to carry on his calling, which, if he stays in the estuary, will completely spoil all my chances. He may, however, be on his way to harvest the great piles of weed that the storm has torn from the rocks, on the seashore itself. In the latter case he will do no harm. Slowly he comes up and I accost him.

“ Where are ye for ? ” I bawl in the wind.

He touches his cap, but appears not to hear. He passes on with a tread as slow as Destiny, puts up the mallards, and finally disappears just as a score of curlew come over crying mournfully and well out of shot.

Dugald must have made his circle by now, I am sure, for though he is so far away I see some peewits rise, and then suddenly in a bunch, and travelling at express speed, the flock of teal. This time the golden plover have taught me a lesson, and I fire very far ahead indeed. Three little balls of feathers drop straight into the estuary and two more slant down upon its farther shore. To the best of my ability I picked my birds, the others flew into the shot circle. I send the dog into the water, and his efforts to find the teal, which are drifting fast, have to be aided by the throwing of a stone, an act which loses me a chance at two curlew. Then come two redshanks, wailing, and immediately after them a large flock of rock-pigeons, of which I get one. And now I can see Dugald’s home-wove cap at the far end of the hollow. A snipe rises, flies straight at me with incredible speed, turns, and gives the easiest of chances as he balances for a moment against the tempest.

Then it is over and Dugald walks up. “ I heard ye shoot,” he says as he surveys the teal. “ ‘ They cam ’ over finely bunched,” he adds presently.

This is, of course, a successful drive—one of the best, indeed, of the

scores I have tried at that place; many is the time that things have gone otherwise, and the birds either been absent or flown over the dunes two hundred yards wide. On one occasion when shooting in the half-lights, I remember a cormorant, diligently journeying over the promontory, came down to a gun who mistook his bulk for that of a greylag goose.

A bird that gives the highest class of sport when driven, and which one consequently wonders is not more often shot in this fashion, is the snipe. To drive snipe in the centre of a big bog is naturally a fairly hopeless business, but upon certain ground snipe can be driven with great and even consistent success. This method is more followed in foreign countries than in the British Isles, although, curiously enough, it has been introduced abroad by British sportsmen. Provided one can find a river with marshy banks, wherever the marshes are not more than a quarter to half a mile in width, snipe-driving can be reduced to a reasonable certainty. No man can be certain or even guess in what direction snipe, when once flushed, will continue their flight, but their habit of circling causes a fair percentage to go over the guns, often very high. In a wind, there is no more difficult shooting.

Many beaters are not necessary for driving snipe unless they are lying very close indeed, since the best results are to be obtained by moving the snipe, rather than driving. Thus a single beater with two stops set two or three hundred yards away is more likely to persuade the snipe to fly in the desired direction than three beaters walking in line. Snipe, after flying forward for a hundred yards or so, are very apt to circle off at right angles. It is useless to attempt a long drive. Half a mile is quite enough, six hundred yards, or even a quarter of a mile, better still, and indeed it is on birds rising within the last two hundred yards that the most execution is done. These birds often fly low, and some proportion of the shots are frequently at birds that do not rise more than three or four feet above the marsh. Nor are such shots easy, for it is quite a fallacy to think that snipe cease their zigzag flight as soon as some people seem to imagine. A high tussock, the crossing of water, a puff of wind are quite enough to cause snipe that have flown quite a long way to begin their dartings all over again.

One of the greatest difficulties, which is always present at a snipe-drive, is the position from which the shots must be taken. Good cover is an absolute necessity, and in order to obtain this, one is usually forced to hide in the reeds. The reeds are often low, and one often sinks into the mud to the knees or higher. As the shot must be taken in many cases from a sitting position, only about half the circle of fire can be covered by the gun, and the overhead shot is also rendered very difficult. Nothing is more annoying than to have the snipe all passing to the right when one cannot get into a shooting position for that side, owing to the fact that one has sunk well into the mire and cannot move one's feet.

As to cover, after October the reeds have been beaten down by the wind and rain, and a human being becomes a very obvious object in a snipe-bog. Therefore each gun should be provided with a light screen : a piece of green calico, four feet by three, attached at each side to a stick, will be found excellent. By thrusting the supporting sticks, which should be about six feet long, into the marsh, one can obtain a shelter, behind which one can move as much as the nature of the footing will allow. It would, of course, be better still if permanent shelters of some kind could be built in the bog, but this is difficult, as they would rapidly subside.

Once the shelter has been successfully erected, a further need arises : as it is impossible to stand up behind so small a screen, one must therefore either sit or kneel. If a man can kneel, all is well, but he usually finishes soaked in December marsh water. At one shoot, the guns were provided with wicker stools upon which they sat, but the ground was phenomenally soft and the stools sometimes disappeared ; also the stools were slippery, and a high overhead shot often resulted in the gun measuring his length on his back in the mud and water.

I have never heard what the record may be for snipe-driving in Britain, but in Europe 252 birds fell in a day to five guns. I shot this carefully preserved ground in the following year, when unfortunately floods had spoiled our prospects, and our party got eighty odd snipe in half a day's shooting. Four of the eight drives we tried were against a very bright sun, so bright that it was necessary to wear blue glasses, and until you become well accustomed to them, glasses do not aid your

marksmanship. The marshes upon which this shooting was done abut upon a river, and one gun—called for the drive the "river gun"—took his stand in a punt under the bank. This gun, whoever he might be, usually made a good percentage of kills to cartridges, whereas the guns in the marsh never did much better than one in three or four—which perhaps was not so bad after all, when one considers that they were often sunk almost to the waist in mud and slime.

The state of the moon is of great importance to the snipe-driver, for if there is no moon the snipe will be busy feeding all day, and will, even after being disturbed, continually return during the course of the drive to their feeding-grounds. But after a moonlight night, they are very wild, and if disturbed will fly great distances. The wind is also important, for it is hopeless to try to drive snipe against a strong wind, and a great number will go away at right angles. The best chance is to drive snipe down-wind, which, if it be a good gale, blows them over the guns like leaves torn from a tree. The man who can kill one snipe in three under ordinary conditions in a fairly small day must be a shot of the highest class. I say "a small day" advisedly, because if one is killing twenty odd snipe in a drive, it argues that there are plenty of birds, and consequently plenty of the easier kind of chance. But when the birds are few and far between, the gun is tempted to take very high birds; a snipe forty yards up is not out of range, though at forty yards he will, even if the shot be absolutely accurate, usually succeed in flying through the pattern. A snipe killed at extreme range falls with its wings outspread—parachutes down, in fact.

One of the worst difficulties in driving, and one which is insurmountable, occurs when the birds are in wisps. I have often seen wisps of fifty or sixty, and, on occasion, wisps of two hundred or more. If the snipe are thus packed, one cannot hope to do anything with them, and it is better to leave them for the day.

Snipe can be shot at flighting time, if the gunner knows where to go and does not object to a very large element of uncertainty. I can recall a bed of reeds in a loch into which the snipe continually dropped during the twilight hour. Fishing beside it one evening, I saw a score of snipe arrive. To any one in the reeds they would have offered very easy shots,

GOLDEN PLOVER
(*Charadrius apricarius*)



as they came in low and quite straight, paused a moment or checked in the air, as if deciding where to alight, and then dropped in like stones.

Another bird rarely driven except in an offhand way, but which certainly is a splendid bird to outwit in this fashion, is the golden plover. In few places is he more abundant than in the lands that lie along the Northumbrian coast. Here, as elsewhere, when the snow is deep, he migrates to the tide-edge, where he falls a prey to the shore gunner, who creeps upon him under the shelter of the sea-wall and shoots at him sitting upon the shingle beside the water. At such times, however, the golden plover is so thin as not to be worth powder and shot. He is a very different bird upon the uplands and the wolds, where his rather sorrowful whistle fits in well with the desolate sky-lines, and with the stormy winds that make the grass so sweet.

There are certain fields that golden plover seem to love to the exclusion of others, certain spots which they always seek when any are in the neighbourhood, and if local knowledge can point out these places, continuous sport can be obtained, when the plover are in the country, by the shooter taking up his position under some hedge on the central line of flight and causing a companion or keeper to move the plover at their chosen resorts. Thirty or forty golden plover can be killed in this way in a day.

Stalking golden plover is excellent fun, but it has the disadvantage that the shot when obtained is usually into the flock and needs no skill whatever to bring off successfully.

I have read in many books that when golden plover fly over too high, a shot fired will often make them sweep earthwards. This is certainly true, but how often does the gunner gain anything by the horizontal dip? Golden plover shooting downwards in a curve are as difficult to hit as any birds that fly.

And how he captivates one's thoughts, this most soft-eyed of all birds, for the golden plover has a gentler eye than any of his kind, and nothing of the hard, darting glance common to almost all his cousins. Upon what strange scenes does he look in the short span of his life? He flies high over northern towns into cold mists bred about the Pole. There during the brief summer he struts in the splendour of his black-breasted

breeding plumage beside meres in wastes unvisited by man. When the time comes for his southward move, he again proves himself a great traveller. His advance guards break their journey in Scandinavia and in our Isles, but his main battalions sweep on over the Giralda Tower and Seville to the marshes and vegas of Andalucian rivers. From there he makes his traverse of the narrow seas to Africa; thus the plover that was hatched in the Arctic waste in June may in November fly over the minarets of the sacred cities of the desert.

It is impossible to think of the golden plover without remembering his next of kin, the green plover. The two species are so often to be seen together, an alliance that is all in favour of the golden plover, since the peewit is the better sentinel and infinitely the more wary bird.

There are many who do not regard the green plover as a good bird for the table, and who, therefore, only shoot them upon occasion. Yet of the so-called "golden plover" served in London restaurants and hotels, at least fifty per cent. are green plover. If the legs are left on the bird when it is served, it is easy to distinguish the two species as the number of toes differ, the golden plover having but three, while his green cousin boasts four. The French have a proverb to the effect that those who have not tasted the *vanneau* (green plover) do not know how good game can be to the palate. Certainly young green plover shot in August and September are as good as almost any bird, and they are without any question wary enough to make stalking them a high art.

The green plover frequently provides a fairly easy shot, though it is wonderful how often he is missed as he flaps over. But if proper advantage be taken of times and season, of ground and, above all, of weather, the peewit can be made to give shots as difficult as any—indeed on occasion the most difficult of any bird without perhaps a single exception. This does not, of course, refer to the stalked peewit—in that sport the fun is purely the getting within range—nor to the ordinary driven bird, but to peewits as they abandon themselves to the wind and are literally blown over the guns.

You must picture an immense spread of dunes covered with little sandy hillocks and raved over by the winds of the Atlantic. Very sweet are the summer flowers on these dunes, and a scent that an islander would

journey far to smell once more, redolent as it is to him of boyhood and long summer evenings. This range of dunes is a great haunt of green plover—flocks five hundred strong are to be seen for ever wheeling and settling; single birds beat slowly up against the west wind, and in the early darkness their mournful cry peoples the gloom.

There are always some particular areas of this great stretch of dunes that the plover favour. Sometimes these areas are a mile apart, sometimes but a few hundred yards. If the shooter, having discovered these areas, can place himself on a windy day between them and then crawl up fairly close to a flock, while his companion walks down-wind upon them, the birds will often rise to a height of twenty yards or so and then suddenly abandon themselves to the force of the gale and, driven by its strength, pass over the head of the shooter with incredible speed.

One evening, just as it was growing dark, I happened, having returned from a long day’s snipe-shooting, to be standing in the lee of a long barn, behind which a high wall running parallel to it divided the waste of dunes from the farm-lands and made a barrier some sixty or seventy yards in length. On the south side stands the lodge, and on that particular evening some herd-girls were driving in cattle on the open ground to the north. A stiff wind was blowing, and down the wind, flying low, then rising and topping the barn, came about three or four hundred green plover in little flocks or singly. As the birds topped the barn, they abandoned themselves to the force of the wind, and were whirled into the gathering darkness, giving the most difficult shots at short range that I have ever seen offered.

Great execution can be done upon peewits over decoys, which readily attract them. To any one with sufficient local knowledge to forecast their lines of flight, their evening visits to the saltings can be made to yield good sport.

I rarely see green plover without calling to mind an episode that occurred at a certain public school. In this episode a green plover played a prominent part. A youth of about fifteen, whom we will call Young Lower Fifth, was wont to pass as much as possible of his summer and winter holidays with a gun, lying out at night on the seashore and spending every shilling of his pocket-money on cartridges. On each return to school

his sporting desires had to be curbed and held firmly in check. But it happened that one wild February brought thousands of plover to the ploughs that lie between the school and the sea. Twice a week the run, with which football was varied, passed through those fields, and in a moment of temptation Young Lower Fifth made up his mind to try his luck with the plover. This determination entailed the smuggling in of a walking-stick gun, which, disguised as an umbrella—for by the unwritten laws that may not be broken only the Sixth were privileged to carry sticks—he succeeded in bringing back after an "up town" leave. For a moment he considered the bold course of leaving it in the umbrella-stand, but prudence led him to adopt a safer if less gallant course. Finally it reposed in a cunning excavation in the wall of his cubicle in the dormitory.

A half-holiday was, of course, the only suitable occasion on which the plan so happily initiated could be carried out. After a week of waiting, a hard frost set in, football was off, and a run to the sea prescribed for the House. Here, then, was the sportsman's chance! Complete secrecy was an absolute necessity—a whisper of his intention would have run like lightning through the school, and the hardihood and very unlikelihood of the deed would have provoked enough comment to wreck a far less risky scheme. Thus Young Lower Fifth could take counsel with himself alone. The plover fields were some two miles out on the road to the sea, and the first step was to get the gun to some handy place. At the earliest opportunity Young Lower Fifth, having the gun ready hidden under his clothes, dashed out and cached it in the plantation beyond the football fields that bordered the same road.

The next problem was a question of time and speed. What with dinner and call-over, it was nearly two o'clock when he started. Usually a lazy youth, it was no surprise that he should bring up the tail end of the run, and the prefect, cursing him for his slowness, hurried on to tick off the first arrivals. Meanwhile Young Lower Fifth, discouraging any companionship, by those methods that serve schoolboys so well, but which we forget in later life, lagged behind, and by 3.30, having recovered his gun, was hurrying at a very different pace on his back track. On his way home from the sea, he had noticed a fine flock of plover in a certain

field beside the road, and towards this he set off with the highest hopes. When he reached it, the plover, glorious to relate, were still there, and he stalked them from behind one of the many stone dykes with which the country is seamed. He easily approached within forty yards of them and had a shot which, as his gun was a .410, somewhat naturally did not take effect ! He crept on and during the best part of an hour had nine shots, all without result. He then realised that success depended on his achieving an approach within twenty yards, or even fifteen, and to this he set his mind. He had just spotted a flock in a good position, when a single plover suddenly flew over him from the west side of the road. It was quite close, and Lower Fifth threw up his gun and down came the bird. A moment later he had leaped over the wall and retrieved it, rejoicing.

It was a fine specimen, and would look well in the school museum, and there he told himself he would go and contemplate it, and it would be a “ good egg.” As he scrambled back into the road, his heart jumped horribly, for he heard a voice shouting “ Hi ! hi ! hi ! ” and was aware of a policeman coming over the hill at the double. He knew enough of the law to be conscious that no one was allowed to shoot within forty yards of the high road, and it was certain the policeman had seen the shot fired. Lower Fifth turned and fled. He could move fast enough when he wished to, and for the next quarter of a mile he made good time, but looking back over his shoulder, he was disagreeably aware that the distance between him and his pursuer was not increasing. Rather the contrary. He tried to put on a spurt. The twilight was now falling, and through the clear frosty air he could hear the heavy footsteps behind perceptibly gaining. At the beginning of the chase he had noticed that his enemy was wearing high boots, and he realised that a man who could make such good time in high boots must inevitably run him down at the last.

Lower Fifth’s next move stands, I think, to the credit of his craft. At this point the road dipped and turned for a hundred yards or so, and here Lower Fifth knew he would be below the policeman’s horizon. A little farther on the road crossed the railway by a bridge. As soon as the boy knew himself to be out of sight, he flung himself through the

hedge and down the embankment, and ran along the line until he was hidden under the bridge.

As he crouched panting in the dark shadow, he was acutely conscious of the possibilities of the situation not, indeed, as concerned the law of the land—that of the school appeared a much more urgent matter. He had broken at least four School rules, and the face of the Head rose as a vision—— At this moment a voice called out :

“ Come ye oot fra' under the brig ! ”

Lower Fifth did not budge, and the policeman plunged down to him, notebook in hand. To the demand for his name and address the boy made no answer, but a glance at his cuts and sweater told the man all he needed.

“ Ye're frae the Collich. I'd better be taking ye back there ! ”

Young Lower Fifth found his voice. “ Why ? ”

“ Ye've broken the law.”

“ Yes, and what's the penalty ? ”

“ That's a ma'er for the magistrate.”

“ What's the most they can fine me ? ”

“ Aboot forty shillings.”

“ Well, I'll pay you that.”

“ Ye'd daur to offer me a bribe ! ”

“ There's no bribe about it. You represent the law.”

“ I do ! ” this grimly.

“ But you don't represent the School. Look here——” and then Lower Fifth explained the probable results.

The policeman listened, but his face did not relax. He was a hard man, and his profession had not softened him.

When the youth was finished, there was silence beneath the “ brig.” At last the policeman took out a piece of paper and wrote upon it.

“ That's where I live,” said he. “ Bring ten shillings there by next Sa'erday and ye'll hear no more of yon shot. I'll tak' yon gun. Ye can have it when ye brings the ten shillings.”

“ Thank you,” said Lower Fifth with real gratitude.

The hand that paid the money and redeemed the gun was a maternal one. The same hand on the same day took a carefully packed green

LAPWING
(*Vanellus vanellus*)



C.C. Willson.

(1881)

plover to a bird-stuffer by request to act as agent on the strength of the following note :

“ Please take it to H——. He’ll do it for nothing, because he said he would when I gave him the third little auk I found dead on the beach last month. Tell him to get the eyes right, rather prominent and darker than he usually sticks in.”

CAUSAMULL DUCKS

CAUSAMULL is an island which lies some three miles west of one of the Outer Hebrides. Beyond it, the foaming reefs round the gaunt rock, Deasker, can glow like molten gold in the sunset, and from them a venturesome prow may sail onwards and see no shore until the cliffs of England's oldest colony, Newfoundland, rise from the fog.

Causamull, in a word, is queen of a hundred skerries; Sgeirleir and Lagan Maskeir are in her court, since upon her alone is set a crown of vegetation—rank grass and weed, it is true, but which, none the less, after a shower shines like an emerald in the sunshine. The island itself at spring-tide is not half an acre in extent, but at low water an expanse of perhaps a quarter of a mile of black boulders is exposed; among those lurk pools of water which grow salt after a high tide, but in the neaps brackish with the rain that rarely fails to fall some time during each four-and-twenty hours. In addition to the pools at the mercy of the tide is one greater pool beside which two or three grey seals give birth to their young every October.

But all this information was gathered at a later date. The first time we heard the name of Causamull was on an occasion when two barrels had brought down a single mallard, and his seven comrades flying over the shoulder of the hill were suddenly lost to sight.

“Where'll they have gone to, Donald?”

The ghillie answered, “Causamull.”

“Let us follow them there.”

That was before the gunner knew that Causamull was an island. The fact became duly impressed upon him in the days which followed. Teal and ducks rose wild from the big bog.

“Have they gone to the ponds on the North Point, Donald?”

“I'm fear'd no. They've carried on over to Causamull, I'm think-

ing," replied the ghillie from the brow of the ridge, then continued as in meditation, "Yon Causamull is a regular sanctuary. A' the big old burly ducks and teals is there. A mon can tell Causamull duck most times by the puir size of him."

And so was coined the term "Causamull ducks," meaning not only a duck from that island, but a "burly" duck. We enjoyed the shooting of many lochs and bogs upon the mainland and shore where were killed a goodly number of wild-fowl, notwithstanding which our hearts were sore because the wind was contrary, and the only boatmen within reach by no means either well equipped or eager to attempt the landing on Causamull in anything approaching "weather," or to desert for any such hazardous employment the lobster-fishing by which they won their daily bread. So, day after day, we watched our mallards and teal rise and make for the distant rock, round which they seemed to circle ere they pitched.

Only twice in that season did we succeed in landing on Causamull. The first time the ducks were unheeded, greater game being in view, to wit, a grey seal, a fair-sized old bull; the second time we killed two teal, almost every living thing except these and the terns, which swooped and stooped over the heads of the intruders, having left the island as we approached it, owing to a difference of opinion amongst our lobster-catchers as to the channel we must choose to reach the rock, a dispute which they carried on in Gaelic at the top of their voices. They were very soulless hunters.

A dozen years passed before, on a certain 2nd of August, two of us stalked a large lot of fourteen or fifteen mallards on Na Roe, the loch on the peninsula which lies opposite to Causamull. On this occasion we accounted for three; the rest rose up in straight and purposeful flight and passed over to the island.

During the whole of that August and September Causamull remained a thorn in our sides. It was a wild season, the wind rarely dropped, and although the lobster-fishers of old days were departed, their great unwieldy boat had passed into the hands of a new firm, who certainly showed no more pronounced love of risk or adventure than their predecessors. But they met our overtures mildly. They would shake their heads, and gabble in Gaelic; then the spokesman, a long-faced man in a khaki

coat, would say, gently, "We couldna do it the nicht." Once they landed us in the daytime and we killed three teal, but at the first discharge the island was naturally left bare of ducks. Many of them flew towards the shore and went down in our own Big Bog, but we returned too late to take any advantage of their very temporary presence there.

It was at this time that we heard the story of Causamull which may or may not have its bearing upon the dislike with which the island is regarded. It appears that some years ago a family set sail from Houghary in Uist for the Monach Isles, taking with them their worldly goods and beeves. The distance is some seven or eight miles, and the course they sailed lay past Causamull. As they came abreast of it, a squall struck and overturned the boat—one man, the father, alone fought his way ashore. Some say that a boat passing between the islands reported the non-arrival on the Monachs of the migrating family; others, that a long-sighted crofter working at tangle-burning on the Uist dunes caught sight of the solitary figure of a man standing upon Causamull, outlined against the glow in the sky. With whichever story the truth may lie, the fact remains that a boat was sent off to the island, but stress of weather forced it to sail away leaving the unfortunate man upon that lonely rock, stretching out his hands in vain. As soon as the storm abated the boat returned and took him off, but not before he had spent several days upon the rock. Providentially, one of his drowned cows had been washed up by the tide, and from this he cut the tongue with a sharp stone and devoured it.

At length there came a night when the wind dropped away altogether, the ghillie was sent down to the hamlet, and in due time returned, bringing the promise of the lobster-fishers to meet us at Scolpaig Point at 1.30 a.m. That evening the usual rubber of bridge was eliminated and premature sleep attempted. Such attempts are not always successful, and to one of us at least it seemed that he had hardly closed his eyes when David was knocking at the door. Some coffee and a sandwich, and then we shoulder our guns and give the cartridge bags to John and go out into the night. A walk of about a mile over the dunes, among scurrying rabbits frisking on the night-wet turf, while above our heads an occasional green plover wings over half seen with his peculiar cry. Soon we are able to hear the light splash of the sea upon the hard sands;

a flock of curlew rise with their shrill complaining, just as we move out across the base of the Scolpaig promontory. John whistles. There is no reply. The lighthouse upon Heiskeir¹ reveals and hides its brightness, the tide sucks at the weed-hung seal-haunted skerries. We wait half an hour and then one of us suggests that the lobster-fishers are not going to fulfil their bargain. But the words are hardly spoken when John hears the boat. He jumps up, whistles again, and this time is answered.

By the light of a lantern we descend the rocks and get aboard. Last of all to leave the land is the Labrador dog, Sinbad. He is ill-named, for he is the worst of sailors, and in consequence hates all boats. For a moment, love of the gun and hatred of seafaring struggle in his heart, then the ruling passion, strong in worse than death, prevails, and he jumps and lies down upon the ballast amidships. John receives his final orders. "As soon as it is light, John, you go and stir up the teal-pool and both the ponds on the North Point. And try and see where the ducks we put off Causamull go to." "All right, sir," says John; and we lose sight of him as we push out from between the rocks.

It is very dark upon the water, and though there is no wind there is a very perceptible swell over which we blunder propelled by a pair of immense sweeps. The low black boat struggles on like some gigantic crippled beetle, her pace seems one of infinite sloth, for dawn we know comes early and we must be hidden among the boulders of Causamull and the boat well away before the east begins to grow white. We point out these things to the long-faced helmsman. He executes the usual Gaelic jabber with the crew, assures us that "it can be all right still."

An hour later, an hour filled with the creaking of oars and the troubles of Sinbad, and at last we see the dark outline of the island with its cairn of stones, a cairn popularly supposed to have been raised by the shipwrecked crofter whose story has been told, but in reality built by the far less romantic hands of a Government surveyor in the performance of his ordinary routine. There is still no hint of dawn as the boat is piloted towards the rock. This is fortunate, since the entry to the tiny harbourage is made the occasion of advisings from all the crew, a continuous

¹ Heiskeir, the skerry with a lighthouse, must not be confounded with the double island of Haskeir, where the great grey seals breed.

fusillade of Gaelic which, though spoken in a series of raucous whispers and with admirable intentions, puts every bird upon the rock to wing. But this matters not, for the birds are only curlew, terns, and cormorants. The ducks are still feeding and plashing in the pools and locks of the mainland whither they fly at sunset. That much we know for certain, for we have seen them coming in so high over the land that it brings to mind the words of the American sportsman and poet anent Canada geese :

“ And the baffled fowler watches,
Hopeless till they fade from sight.”

At length a leap and we are ashore ; we hear the boat put out again and soon she is lost to hearing as well as to sight. Causamull is shrouded in darkness ; still as is the night, the breakers are thundering on the western reefs. We are full half an hour too soon, so after choosing each a pool, we come together and chat, till, warned by a real or fancied whitening in the east, we go finally to our places.

Causamull is covered with vast boulders among which it is easy to find hiding. I stand behind one facing the mainland and the east. In front of me are two pools of brackish water, all the island around is dark, but these two pools begin to turn from black to grey, and then more slowly from grey to white. “ Whish ! whish ! ” Those ducks have passed over ! “ Whish ! whish ! ” again. How curious ! Where can that lot have gone to ? I wait in expectation. Surely they are only circling round, but alas ! I wait in vain. Then “ Swish ! swish ! ” once more. This time I swing up the gun and fire. A great body falls from the sky, so great that I have my fears. I send Sinbad to find out. He takes a long time, longer than he should. At length he returns dragging a huge fowl scart by the tip of its wings. He has scarcely got to cover when three teal come straight in very low. They are all bunched together, and the three fall to the discharge of two barrels.

And now my companion shoots in his turn. He has made no mistake, for I hear two thuds upon the rocks. I think from the distinctness of the sound they must be mallards which had fallen, but in that I am mistaken, for they turn out to be teal. Meantime, the east has grown so bright that the sun cannot be far below the horizon. It is to be a red sunrise,

PINTAIL
(*Dafila acuta*)



for the pink takes a ruddier hue, which presently extends over half the sky. It is time now that John should be putting something off the mainland ponds. Ah, here they come !

Nineteen ducks flying swiftly from the land but high, high above the surface of the sea, so high that although they pass clean over me I do not fire, as surely they will circle round again. I watch them; on and on they fly into the dark west until they are lost to sight. Next come a really big flock of teal; there are more than thirty birds in that flock, but they are, if anything, flying higher than the mallards which preceded them. They, too, pass above me, and this time I swing two guns' length ahead of the leader and fire both barrels. The teal jump into the air, shooting straight upwards as they will when fired at, but this is the only result that my shot produces, and they also wing their way into the last of the vanishing night-cloud. Now a single teal pitches in the pool right in front of me. I did not see him arrive, and just as I am about to flush him he is joined by a second. They swim rapidly out of sight. I step from behind my rock and have a rising shot, but kill only one bird and miss the other. I have not time to get back to shelter again before four ducks come wide and high only to pass on in the wake of the others towards the Monach Islands.

It is full day now, but the beautiful night has been succeeded by a grey sky; a light rain is beginning to fall, and as the sun has risen red it is pretty certain that the morning at any rate will develop badly.

I now go to pick up the first three teal, only to discover to my disgust that the rising tide has swept them from the pool in which they fell, and by now they are no doubt twisting in the currents that foam and rush between the rocks. I gather one that fell in the pool and rejoin my companion. He has killed three teal and gathered two, the third has fallen in some hole among the rocks; indeed, so jagged and full of crannies is the Causamull formation that twenty-five per cent. of the birds shot can never be recovered.

We were both, as we laid out our bag, grievously disappointed at its very meagre proportions. We had dreamed of thirty ducks, and behold three ! And the curious part of it is that we had seen the ducks and the teal, seen them clearly and distinctly ere they vanished into that black

night-cloud which has now lifted completely, leaving in its place the pale dunes of the Monachs. What has prevented the ducks coming into the ponds that we were watching? Ourselves, we are sure, they had not seen. Could it have been the boat? We know well enough that the presence of the boat would cause every duck to sheer off, but in the steady purposeful flight there has been no sheering. We climb to the cairn. No, it is not the boat. There she lies, well away, quite far enough away to make it impossible for the sight of her to have affected the ducks' destination. We wave the men to come for us and row sorrowfully back to the mainland.

The boatmen, when questioned, acknowledged that they had never seen ducks behave in such a fashion. Where could they be making for? Out to sea, they thought, for there are few pools upon the Monachs. Finally the boatmen rather fancied that the ducks must have sighted us, but receded from this opinion when we pointed out that various curlew had passed over us without suspicion.

It was about seven o'clock when we disembarked once more upon Scolpaig. John was there to meet us. He had seen few ducks and thought perhaps it was rather early in the season for the ducks to pitch upon Causamull. Further speculation was interrupted by the spying of a large gaggle of grey geese in the amphitheatre of the dunes. These we tried to circumvent by driving, but luck was dead against us that morning, and the fine birds went away unshot at by one of the many unguarded points.

A good solid rain was falling long ere we reached the house. Our expedition was over and the anticipations of several days had ended in blank failure. If all the ducks we had seen had pitched upon Causamull, or had circled round it or even had flown over it, we should have got ten or fifteen brace, and the fact remains that one of us, watching in the early morning, had several times seen the ducks fly out and circle and drop. Why had they failed to do so on this occasion? We learnt the answer that night. Higher up the coast lies a certain village where at the time there was but a single, and that a not very seaworthy, boat. The owners of this craft, tempted by the fair weather, had upon the evening previous to our visit to Causamull put to sea. About five or six o'clock,

finding themselves in the vicinity of Causamull, they had landed upon it in search of driftwood, and had even fired at a family party of ducks upon one of the pools. No wonder the ducks flew high when we waited so patiently for them just ten hours later !

We were not, of course, so much cast down at our ill-luck once that ill-luck was satisfactorily explained. We knew that could we but land upon Causamull any time after the middle of September our reward would be a rich one, for soon the ducks would forget the visit of the fishermen and return to their natural haunts. During six whole weeks we were ready each and every night to put to sea, but not once did the weather give us an opportunity. Wild storms and stiff breezes with hardly a lull or an interlude ruled all those weeks, nor in that year were we able to get a return match with the ducks of Causamull upon their own ground. Upon ours the case was different, for by dint of lying out at fighting time and waiting on the stubbles in the dunes, we occasionally got back a little of our own.

Once, for instance, the gardener's boy came with a story that each day as he walked over the hill in the early morning he saw a large flock of mallards rise from the reeds of a certain loch and head straight out to sea. We had often shot this loch after breakfast, usually driving it, and grand sport had we had there. In one stand alone mallard, teal, snipe, golden plover, curlew, pigeon and peewit had been shot, but never had we caught the Causamull ducks lurking in its reeds.

The morning after the news of the gardener's boy had been received two guns and a ghillie were at the loch side soon after daylight. One gun took up his position behind an inhabited hen-house on the further side of the loch, while the ghillie and the second gun went in the boat. Hardly had they started before a flock of some forty mallards rose out of the reeds. The hen-house gun, surrounded as he was by indignant fowls, succeeded in getting a right and left in front and a single snap behind before the flock were out of shot—all three that fell were very fathers of ducks. The rest headed straight away for Causamull, nor did they ever, to our knowledge, visit that loch again.

Once, indeed, one of the guns had a most trying experience. He was waiting in the evening among the stooks at the edge of some barley,

which the ducks had been visiting very freely, when a gaggle of about sixty grey geese came bugling down the wind to pitch within two hundred yards of him. There was every prospect that they would feed into the corn and give the gunner such a shot as would cause the occasion to be marked for ever with red in his sporting diary. After lying watching the birds, which were slowly approaching, for a quarter of an hour, the gunner became aware that a party of ducks were flying in from the sea. Causamull ducks, undoubtedly ! They flew over within nice shot and were followed by several other lots, which were, of course, permitted to pass. But there was not, alas, any reward for abstinence, as darkness fell with the geese still a hundred yards away, and a hurried stalk in the fading light ended in complete failure.

In that year, indeed, the ducks of Causamull met with but one even moderately severe reverse. This was a windy evening when they antedated their shoreward evening flight into the barley by a quarter of an hour. The casualty list showed thirteen.

Causamull, as has been said, lies three miles from the mainland. As a breeding-place for ducks it is impossible, and this for a variety of reasons. First, there is no food; secondly, the sprays of ocean fly over the entire surface of the rock; thirdly, the place is haunted by great black-backed gulls, besides being the nesting station for numbers of sea-birds of various kinds, with whom the wild ducks would not be permitted to dwell in any amity. The ducks, therefore, certainly breed upon the marshes and loch-sides of the mainland. This being so it is wonderful how soon they find their way out to their sanctuary and the sea. Young flappers fly there in earliest August. On one occasion an exceedingly thin moulting mallard was found in the highest pool in the island on the 19th of the same month. Doubtless it had flown across just before it lost the use of its wings and had remained an involuntary prisoner. So thin was it that its breast-bone was nearly breaking through the skin.

And now another year has passed away, and once more the ducks are beginning to gather upon Causamull; once more we have stolen ashore there before the dawn, but this time a great many birds have carried on out of shot over us to Deasker. This constitutes one of the many difficulties that make a good "flight" on Causamull early in the season so

rare. Many factors must work together to ensure it. First, the weather must permit a landing; secondly, the tide must not be too high or there will be no pools for the ducks to pitch upon; lastly, it must not be too low, or half, and more than half, the ducks will fly over Causamull to the attractions of Deasker, four miles seaward. Why not, you may say, have one gun on Deasker and two on Causamull and circumvent the ducks in that way? We discussed that plan and longed to be able to carry it out. But if the nights when one can land upon Causamull are few, those upon which a landing may be effected on Deasker—in the local judgments by which we are bound—almost reach vanishing point.

Deasker is simply a reef; at spring tides it is covered by the sea. It is so small that half the birds one shot would fall into the water, and even in calm weather their masters would not lightly venture Sinbad or Gambler in the Atlantic swell. Nevertheless, but for the boatmen who, after all, little as we may like to acknowledge it, ruled our schemes, we should ere this have flighted upon Deasker. Some day in the future we may yet do so.

But for the moment we have another plan, and that is to reverse the order of things and “stir up” Causamull by daylight. Two guns will go in the boat to the island, and one will wait on the north point upon the mainland. The latter will get some shots at the ducks as they fly in to the ponds; more important still, he will be able to observe where the birds, which go beyond the Big Bog, pitch, and afterwards, joined by his companions, will pursue them.

It is a perfect day as the North Point gun walks to his post upon the promontory. On the way he puts up a gaggle of at least 150 grey geese, which wing their way towards the dark hills that look so grand and so gloomy in contrast to the turquoise sea and sands bright as a silver bar.

At length he arrives at his appointed post beside the larger of the promontory ponds. He finds five ducks upon it, but in quite an unstalkable position, and at once they are up and away—off to Causamull.

And now lying on the fragrant dune beside a little island in the pond, whereon wild flowers blow, and while the boat with its dark sails—they are really dirty, but here, as elsewhere, “distance lends enchantment”—creeps out towards Causamull, let us look round. We have a glass,

we examine the skerries, the Monachs, the lighthouse, even grim and distant Haskeir, that vast rock in whose bowels the Atlantic plays thunder-music. There it lies, robbed of half its savage gauntness by the haze.

An hour passes—the boat is quite close to Causamull. Down come the sails; now they are landing. Bang! bang! and from far away the ducks and teal begin to appear. Few of them come to the ponds on the North Point, but many go down in the Big Bog, some on Dunscaur, and others continue their flight till the eye loses them against the inland hills.

Presently our comrades re-embark. We gather up our two teal, all we have secured, and all meet for lunch at Seal Point. Afterwards we pursue the ducks, and by the time we knock off to go fishing we have bagged twenty. Not a great day, but a very pleasant one. A day the results of which may cause a smile, yet to us who have participated in it, a day of real sport, to be underlined perhaps more heavily than many another when the panniers groaned with their loads of grouse, or the game cart carved deep ruts in the drive.

Well, that is the best to date, but we often picture the glorious twenty minutes about dawn when the ducks fly in to Causamull, and a desire, which is never quite at rest, strengthens, a desire to return and try to wipe out in fair and honourable victory the many defeats we have experienced in our too rare encounters with those gallant adversaries, “Causamull ducks.”

NOTE.—Since the above was written, two of us succeeded in landing on Causamull in February. We picked up twenty-four ducks and widgeon, and seven various at the morning flight. The number might easily have been more than half as many again, but the tide was high and rushed between the various rocks of the Causamull formation with such force as to be very dangerous for the Labrador dog. It was therefore useless to shoot unless we could make fairly certain of dropping the bird on the rocks, and consequently many a splendid chance had to be foregone.

CURLEW

IT is certain that the curlew has a place of its own in literature. Indeed, few birds have done such yeoman service—for the novelist at any rate. “As Hamish descended the Hill,” one reads, “the curlews rose, calling plaintively from the little wood on the outskirts of which Jean was waiting for her lover.” The habits of these curlews were, to say the least of it, out of the common. Indeed, it may be confessed that the ornithological equipment of novelists (even the greatest) is not invariably accurate; but as long as they keep to the sea-shore or the moors they are fairly safe with the curlew, and probably to the end of time the bird will be used as a literary property by all and sundry.

On the other hand, it has inspired some great passages; among them the beautiful dedication of *The Stickit Minister* to “Robert Louis Stevenson, of Scotland and Samoa,” in the words :

“ . . . I dedicate these tales of that grey Galloway land, where about the graves of the martyrs the whaups are crying—his heart remembers how.”

The cry of the curlew is, indeed, rarely absent from wildest Britain. It breeds from Cornwall to Caithness, and one of the things the British traveller first misses when camped beside an alien ocean is its questing and sorrowful note. Still, one has to travel far to leave it behind; for its range extends (apart from allied forms which cover Turkestan, India, China, and the Malays) from Greenland round every European coast. Sometimes, also, the African traveller comes across it in the interior of the land of Ethiopia, and the pilgrim to Mecca hears it as he recites the attributes of God. Yet it is also to be found all the year round upon our own coasts, even in the nesting season, when the young cock-birds do not

repair with the parents of the race to the high moors in order to undertake family cares, but live beside the tide edges where they are joined later by the vast flocks from the uplands.

The estimation in which curlew are held by individual shooters differs tremendously. Some place them amongst the most sporting of birds: to others their name is anathema. "Those cursed curlew," says such a one, "they lost me a fine chance at the widgeon. I wish they were all killed off." So do not others. The curlew has given to some of us—at least—days or even weeks of interest, and has enlivened many a weary wait. He is a splendid bird on which to start the youthful sportsman; for though there is exaggeration in the old saying that he who has bagged seven curlew is a master of the gun, yet the boy who stalks and kills a curlew with a pea-rifle deserves to be permitted to cope with the horned beasts of the mountain.

There is in Jersey, on the eastern coast, where the sun rises over the sea from behind the stones of Dol, a long, long bay with a curving pebble beach of perfect symmetry. Here is a sea-wall carried on more or less continuously until it merges into the golf-links. Standing almost on the wall are two or three martello towers, formerly rented as dwelling-places to the island peasantry. Some of these are farmers, others labourers; but one and all seem to possess the inalienable right to gather "vraick" on the sea-edge opposite to their dwellings. This vraick, or seaweed, is dried in the sun and used for purposes of manure. A part of it is burnt as fuel—the ashes afterwards enriching the ground. One of the farmers, an old friend, told me that in a single year he had gathered eighteen pounds' worth of "vraick," and on eighteen pounds a year he and his wife (so strong is the thrifty Breton blood) were rich. I often went to see this old man in later years, for he was excellent company and had a considerable fund of dry humour. Congratulating me one day, on my safe return from South America, he said: "I should like to travel too, me, ah, yes! *But not more than an hour from the land.*" He had never left Jersey but once, when he had gone with his white-capped, lean-faced old wife to Guernsey, where the two salient impressions he received were, first, that there were "bad peoples" in that island who asked him *2d.* a pound too much for butter; and secondly, that one could ride "long ways" in the

tram for a penny. Albeit, he was a very shrewd old fellow, crabbed to a degree; but having known me from a child was ever ready to further my youthful plans in any conceivable way—legal or illegal. Yet a more pig-headed antagonist than he habitually made to the world at large it would be quite impossible to conceive. He would certainly have died, pitchfork in hand, in defence of the least of his rights, and once, when a passing terrier chased his farm-cat (an animal which I know he loathed) on to the roof of his house, he ran after the carriage which the dog was accompanying almost into Gorey, three miles away. He is dead now, and let us hope the vraick-scented sand lies lightly on his bones. He never showed the least outward sign of affection for his wife, but he only survived her a few weeks, struck suddenly by her loss out of a hale old age.

In a neighbouring farm lived Philip John Gaudin, who won the Queen's Prize for rifle shooting in the old days when the competition took place at Aldershot. He was not a sportsman, nor did he ever, to my knowledge, fire at a bird, though sometimes I used to persuade him to give me a lesson with the rifle. Never shall I forget, or cease to be grateful for his words spoken when he met me at the age of twelve carrying my first gun. "Ah, young master, ah!" said he. "Here you come carrying the death of two men—one in each barrel—never forget—a very young man carrying two deaths!" To this day, it is difficult to watch a wild shot without remembering that cogent remark. Evening after evening old Philip and his three sons would lie with their rifles on the short grass outside the farm practising steadiness and position. For many years they were able to beat any other four that might essay to try conclusions with them. But (except when the brent geese came) none of them, nor of the other farmers, ever fired a shot on the shore; and this though in the interior of the island (where shooting is free) every lane was patrolled by local or French sportsmen in search of blackbirds and fieldfares. A few gunners from across the Channel carried horns and blew them, but whether over the fallen thrush, who knows? Certainly there was little else to blow them over, for the last red-legged partridge had been slain at Plémont in 1876; and though there was still in 1888 a legendary hare, I did not hear that it ever came out from the land of myth into any of those green-tasselled game-

bags. On the other hand, the shore despised by the gunners of the island was not ill supplied with wading birds, and in the season with both widgeon and geese. At low tide a vast panorama of rock and sand was exposed, the tide receding to an immense distance. On the wide flats the curlew were naturally almost impossible of access; indeed, the place possessed certain disabilities that made curlew shooting really difficult. Thus, when the flocks (there were in August but two or three of them) flew down from the hills above Grouville at the hour when their feeding-grounds by the shore began to be exposed, they usually passed over too high to reach, and on the open flats a stalk was out of the question. Something was to be done by lying for hours among the rocks—but not much, as the area was so wide that the flight was never concentrated. Each fortnight, however, brought two golden chances. These occurred when the tide reached its height just *before* dawn. Before dawn because the vraick-gatherers were terribly early people, and their appearance was, of course, always a signal for the curlew to seek the high lands in the interior of the island. But when high water heralded the dawn, the curlew gathered under the sea-wall in positions where they could be approached with every chance of success. Owing to the fact that the sea-wall was built into the dunes, there was no such thing—save here and there—as an easy approach. Every bird killed meant a crawl and a quick shot, if the weapon was a shot-gun; whereas one that fell to what Colonel Roosevelt calls “the weapon of the freed-man”—that is, the rifle—was in reality a more worthy trophy than is many an outwitted stag.

Glorious dawns were those spent lying face downwards among the diamonds of the dew on the short close-growing turf that bordered the shingle ridge, when a successful shot had power to brighten the whole world, and a failure to darken it. Quite alone, and without advice or aid, I was in the happy position of being able to work out my own salvation. At the age of thirteen I conceived and carried out the brilliant idea of hiring (2s. a day, or 7s. 6d. the week) a huge single-barrelled 8-bore. It was almost as tall as its bearer, and it was not in any way necessary or desirable for shooting at curlew in August; but pride in its huge proportions survived the bleeding nose and puffed lip that resulted as five and a half drams of black powder (the gunmaker was a wise man and lessened

the normal loads) made seven stone gasp and flinch. One morning, however, the huge hireling went off into a flock of curlew of which three remained behind on the shingle, to be gathered in the ecstasy of a joy never to be forgotten, and not since, I think, approached.

The main cause of the scarcity of curlew on the Les Marais beaches was probably the over-population of the island behind them. The curlew moves at sight of man sooner than other birds. Once I had a fine object-lesson of this. Coming over the crown of the downs (it was in Uist in the Hebrides) I saw along the length of a great bay below me a large quantity of fowl of various kinds. Quite close beside the tide edge were a flock of oyster-catchers and dunlins, beyond them a pair of great black-backed gulls; further, a number of sheldrake; and in the distance, by the other horn of the bay, a flock of about a hundred curlew. These were gathered on a rock surrounded by the tide. In the water near this rock floated an eider duck with a family of three, and some cormorants. Such was the scene that a careful survey with the telescope disclosed. On my rising against the skyline, the oyster-catchers, which were not a hundred yards away, were the first to fly—after them went the curlew, though a full mile distant. The black-backs let me come within a hundred and twenty yards, the sheldrake within three hundred. The only birds that I believe to be better able to take care of themselves than curlew are grey geese. They do not, it is true, fly when danger is as far off as do curlew; but their departure when the fowler is still 200 or 300 yards away is not (as is the curlew's at a mile) born of panic, but of reason—the sagacity of the super-bird. The goose is wise where the curlew is merely wild; yet this ultra-wildness renders the killing of curlew a matter of difficulty even when experience, knowledge of the ground and numbers are on the side of the "gun." Good bags with curlew are, of course, to be made; but success can never be guaranteed even to the limited extent which is possible with ducks. I have known evenings when a single gun could have shot twenty curlew—once, when fighting, I killed ten in half an hour, and then stopped shooting because, combined with the morning's duck-shoot, we had as many birds as would supply the crofters.

Perhaps a drive is necessary in order to bring out to the full the possibilities of the curlew as marks for the gun, and when the birds come

down-wind there must be good shooting to fill the bag. But it will be more satisfactory to illustrate with a concrete instance.

In one of the Outer Hebrides there is a spot where an arm of the tides runs far up into the dunes. On one side of this arm lie saltings which are a favourite resort of curlew, especially at high tide, when the ocean-surrounded rocks that form their sanctuaries are covered. The tide flows into the bay by a narrow channel of swift water which has cut its way through the dunes so that its silver beaches abut on jagged cliffs of sand some fifty feet in height. On the other side of the water, under slopes of green turf, lie the large saltings I have described; behind them, on the summit of the cliffs, extend in their season many acres of stubble of barley and oats.

Here curlew congregate; indeed, by driving the beaches and saltings, and choosing the hour when the tide is nearly at the full so that the rocks in the bay are submerged, hundreds of curlew can be moved on to the stubbles. The driving must, of course, be carried on with knowledge, and the birds moved in a skilful fashion from one feeding-ground to another. The guns then take their places under the high cliffs of sand facing the stubbles and dunes, while two men, sent round very carefully, move the curlew towards them. If this is gently and quietly done, the birds come in small companies and even singly, giving splendid shooting; so that it is quite conceivable that the most favoured gun may fire twenty or even more shots. We never had much success when trying to drive curlew up-wind; but with a gale behind them, which bore them forward and blew away the noise of the shooting in front, the sport was splendid. A few blue-rock pigeons often came over, as well as plover, both green and golden. The quickness with which the curlew turned on seeing the guns was remarkable. If one managed to shoot before the curlew discovered the presence of danger, the result was generally satisfactory; but when the flock broke and scattered, the dip made by the birds in that act was as quick as the twist of a snipe.

Curlew cannot be driven often, for no birds sooner abandon a line of flight upon which they meet with persecution. Drive them the same way twice in one week, and the third time the bag will be exceedingly small; it will probably consist of a single old bird which, as it were of contrariness, flies along a different line to his fellows.

COMMON CURLEW
(*Numenius arquata*)



Wild as curlew are, they occasionally give easy chances, and very occasionally they may be shot rising like snipe. Such opportunities occur when the gunner comes suddenly over the brow of a hill or rock; but this reference specially applies to birds rising from tussocks, and more particularly from among potatoes. A rising curlew is rather a clumsy, flurried bird, and always exceedingly vociferous.

In the breeding season the curlew, then birds of the moors and the mountains, find a courage as remarkable as is their timidity at other seasons. Let the human intruder wander near the nests and the outraged parents will fly screaming about him, so near that their expostulation is deafening; in this demonstration both sexes take part, for the cock is an excellent husband and bears his full share of domestic toil.

When curlew are feeding in a flock, they do not seem to appoint one of their number to act as sentinel, as do wild geese, though sometimes a bird seems to sustain the part voluntarily; but, on the other hand, a dozen curlew may often be seen all feeding at the same time—a state of things that would never be permitted among geese or widgeon. Still, the curlew are so quick of sight and hearing, and so watchful by nature, that every member of the flock may be said to be a sentinel.

As far as my own experience goes, other birds dislike the neighbourhood of curlew. This does not refer to small waders, but rather to duck, geese, and widgeon. Cormorants and curlew seem to be good friends, at least to the extent of frequenting the same rocks. Large flocks of curlew and green and golden plover feed close together, but do not actually mix to any great extent.

The curlew spends a good deal of his time during the autumn in the cornfields, where great sport may be had. Half a dozen painted wooden decoys, and a secure and well-concealed hiding-place among the stooks, are necessities, while the services of a ghillie, who may be told to keep the birds moving in any distant haunt they are known to frequent, will always add to the number of shots obtained.

One summer evening I was watching for curlew with a couple of painted wooden decoys set up, when an old bird flew noiselessly up and settled within a yard or two of the decoys. It was some moments before he discovered that there was something wrong, but when he did he made off

in a terrible state, continuing the shrillness of his clamour until he was out of hearing.

Curlew are birds of very regular habits, flying here and there at certain stages of the tide, and to a less extent at nightfall and dawn. It is when their favourite sea-feeding and resting-grounds are uncovered about sunset that the full opportunity of the fowler comes. If he can hide himself behind some rock in their line of flight, he may shoot till his barrels are hot. Such a spot is to be found by a northern estuary, where a sandbank is the nightly resort of thousands. This sandbank is uncovered within half an hour of the beginning of the ebb, and as it is some three-parts of a mile out in the water the birds on it are not, after dusk, much disturbed even by the continued banging of a gun on the shore. The curlew flocks, moreover, fly down a long string of marshes bounded by dunes, so that the main flight is of necessity concentrated. Evening after evening I have there awaited the coming of the curlew. On the first occasion they arrived quite early, flying comparatively high, perhaps fifty or more feet above ground; on the second evening only a few birds put in an appearance, but chancing to go out at a later hour I heard them calling on the sandbank. Therefore on the following night I remained longer. It was bright starlight, but the birds did not begin to appear till half-past eight; then for half an hour they were coming all the time, flying so low that it was impossible to see them against the dark background of rock and marsh. By changing my position and lying some yards down the side of the ridge I was able to get a momentary glimpse as they topped the skyline ahead, and never have I enjoyed shooting more. A good many plover came with the curlew, and the bag which fell to a great deal of powder and shot was fourteen head. It might have been much more, but it was necessary to send the dog at once whenever I thought that a bird was down, and as the dog was as black as the shadows and the night, the low-flying curlew could not be shot till he returned.

But of all sport that has ever fallen to my lot with curlew, far and away the best (because the conditions presented difficulties that seemed at first sight insuperable) was on the great stretch of sand in St. Ouen's Bay, Jersey. Here were plenty of curlew, a bay some miles in length, a beautiful strand, and actually not a particle of cover. The tide recedes to a good

distance, and lying with a glass among the dunes, the watcher may count large flocks feeding on the sand-hoppers and running on the edge of the water. A few efforts made at high tide, when stalking was possible from behind the dunes, were not altogether unproductive of result; but the absolute immunity which the curlew enjoyed upon the open expanses at other times gave birth to a strong desire to outwit them there.

So it came that one October day—when the sky and sea, the sun and gorse, made up the blue and gold colouring typical of the Channel Islands, and the hard sands were so white as to hurt the eye like the glare of a North African highway—I waited until the tide was nearly ebb, and then commenced to dig a series of pits in the sand about 200 yards apart, and each 100 yards nearer the shore than the last. Starting in the centre of the bay, I thus had a series of hiding-places to suit each stage of the incoming tide. The pits were rather inclined to hold more or less water, and at first the displaced sand was very obvious, but soon the sun bleached it to dry whiteness. An hour after the turn of the tide I occupied my first pit, while a companion went round and walked the beach towards me from the eastern end.

I have often thought that among the most delightful moments in the whole of one's shooting career are those when first one lies in ambush and contemplates the chances of success. Anyhow, the memory of those moments in the shallow pit on that glorious day of blue and gold, with the autumn sun boring a hole into my back, have not passed away.

There were several flocks of curlew, and the first of them rose while my companion was still a long way off, just as I had seen them rise a dozen times before my own advance. On and on they came, not ten feet above the sand, and sailed right up within range without suspicion. And then, as the two barrels went off, what a commotion, what a swerve out to sea! The same thing happened with other flocks at some of the other pits. We drove them east and we drove them west; a great day, and one which the unusual and almost sub-tropical weather marked out in unique relief.

There is a lot of fun to be had with curlew in a country of stone walls, where the birds are on the plough or in the turnips and potatoes. If the walls are high and their building solid, the stalk is easy; but where

they are storm-blown and tumble-down the skill of a true hunter is called forth.

I remember an occasion when a curlew feeding under such a wall proved too great a temptation to a schoolboy who was supposed to be shore-shooting along the tide edge of the Firth of Forth. In those days a famous Headmaster used to permit shore-shooting to chosen boys of his great School. One day I was walking on the road to Aberlady when two bare-headed boys with guns came charging out from behind a hedge. One of them held a dead curlew in his hand. They began to run at full speed along the road, checked and had an argument, one pointing one way and one the other; then they deliberately came up to me.

"I say, you won't give us away?" the spokesman said, panting. "We're going to hide behind that wall. The keeper's after us. The Head . . ." He paused, thinking perhaps that he had given away too much to the casual stranger. We stayed, looking at each other.

"You'd better get behind the wall quickly," I said.

"Thanks awfully," came from two voices: and, with almost uncanny suddenness, I was alone in the road.

I strolled on a little, and soon heard the beat of rapid footsteps behind me, as a hard-featured old keeper ran up.

"Have you seen my two young gentlemen, sir?" he asked.

Cunning man! He wanted to give me the impression that the boys were under his charge and sent out to shoot with him by his master. His cunning, however, made my answer the easier.

"I have not!" I said definitely—my last scruple, if ever I had one, gone.

"They run down this way. They were after my partridges, shooting into a covey from behind the dyke."

We looked at each other, and I'll swear he reddened.

"This has been a very good partridge year up here?" I asked.

He stared. "Not good nor bad." There was something in his eye as he said this that told me how best I could serve the young sinners who were quaking within fifty yards behind the wall.

"Do you see many pintail about here?" I asked. "I read in last week's *Field* that the Firth of Forth . . ."

RINGED PLOVER
(*Ægialitis hiaticula*)



But he thought I was delaying him on purpose.

"Good afternoon, sir, good afternoon," he said testily, "I must be getting on." He walked till he was round the corner, and then I heard the plunk of his boots in the mud as he started again at the double. A few minutes later and the boys climbed over the wall.

"Thanks awfully," they said again, and set off running in the opposite direction to that the keeper had taken.

I met them, by chance, later that evening, waiting for the same train. They greeted me shyly, but with evident friendship. I asked for news.

"It was all right. We didn't see him again. He's an awful liar," one said. "We never touched his rotten partridges. It was a curlew quite close to the wall. We crept up, and . . . You see, we couldn't get near to them on the shore, and . . . and . . . It's a ripping bird, isn't it?" The boy had the bird wound up in his jersey. He produced it. "I'm . . . we're going to have it stuffed," he ended.

I never learned the boys' names, but I have sometimes wondered if either of them was an embryo Selous, and if somewhere a battered curlew on a stand may recall an early adventure and an escape from the tempestuous and roaring wrath of one of the greatest of Headmasters.

Many people debar themselves from curlew-shooting because the curlew, they say, is no bird for the table; and it is true that, while I have eaten some good curlew, others have needed the seasoning of hunger; but all through the Western Isles, where the greater part of my curlew-shooting has been done, the native relishes curlew almost as much as duck. He likes a cormorant better than either, in which he approaches the standard of taste in vogue among the Eskimo, to whom the bird that enjoys a diet of fish or sea-lice forms flesh that most rejoices the palate of the squat *gourmet* of the Arctic.

Allied to the curlew are the whimbrels, both the common and the Eskimo. The latter is a very rare visitor; but the former breeds in the Orkneys and Shetlands, and twice a year passes over these islands in migration. So regular is the date of its appearance that it is, as is well known, locally called the Maybird. A fact that I have never seen recorded is the occurrence of very large flocks in the Channel Islands, where it may be met on both autumn and spring migration. They suffer little at the

hands of the fowler, in which they are more fortunate than the Eskimo curlew, which used to visit Labrador in vast flocks so regularly that their appearance was counted upon by both settlers and Eskimo. Nowadays the Eskimo curlew is practically unknown in Labrador. They are supposed to have been poisoned on their passage through the Southern States.

But to return to the true curlew. Although he is more essentially, perhaps, than any other bird a denizen of the wild, yet sometimes he may be seen near the centres of civilisation. In the evening, flocks often fly by Ravelston Dykes over Edinburgh, and we may believe that Alan Breck heard them as he waited for David Balfour at Rest-and-be-Thankful, that spot which is nowadays the Mecca of the Writer to the Signet's Sunday constitutional. The curlew is not out of place there, nor out of the picture which includes the high Corstorphine Woods, as well as from another vantage point, that view which drew out the word-picture: "I saw all the country fall away before me down to the sea, and in the midst of this descent, on a long ridge, the City of Edinburgh smoking like a kiln . . . and ships moving or lying anchored in the Firth."

But the curlew occasionally appears in other places; at the heart of populous cities where one would scarcely expect to see him, or on wharf-surrounded expanses of black mud in the shadow of giant houses of merchandise. Once, near Glasgow, a single bird rose from a pool of slime in the vicinity of a huge gasometer—he rose and headed away for the Clyde; let him reach it and pass over the tossing water, flying above giant liners until, far away, his sharp eyes discern the Kyles of Bute.

WITH WIDGEON AND MALLARD

THE widgeon is a bird which offers a better challenge to the fowler than any of his kind. He is, of course, by far the most common of the sea-living or shore-living ducks, and he is never easy of approach; the rising shot when you see his grey back is very rare. He is, therefore, the king of all ducks, not even excepting the mallard.

Shooting widgeon, like shooting geese, has in it much of the elements beloved of the big-game hunter. Especially is this the case when the shooting is done upon lochs. Here you have the true pursuit of the wild creature undertaken in the proper conditions.

Imagine that we are driving along a road in one of the Outer Hebrides, and slowly coming to the head of a steep incline. On one side are the telegraph-wires through which the wind, laden with the scent and sting of the Atlantic, blows its thin note. Beyond this and the road is no sign of life at all; but on the north, where the country falls away to a lower level, vast areas of heather, long unburned and now giving harbourage to an ever-lessening stock of grouse, stretch to the chiaroscuro of the hills.

Before we reach the top of the incline we stop the trap, and leaving the horse in charge of our single companion, walk over the hill. As we do so, a vast prospect unfolds itself, the dark heather merges into the silver sand, and beyond that the ocean lies like a floor of winking steel. But between us and it, three miles away, a dozen lochs lie embosomed in the dark heather.

We sit down upon a milestone and carefully examine the nearer and then the farther surfaces. The nearest is tenantless, but on two of the others we find the little dark-looking dots we desire. On the first they are well out in the centre, a hundred and fifty yards from shore; but on the next they have collected in a narrow neck and the bulk of them are not thirty yards from land, while some are even nearer. We return to the trap

and explain the situation. The faithful henchman departs to put up at a fishing village on the back-trail, while we and a dog go forward to try the widgeon.

The dog is well used to the procedure, and has been taught long ago on summer evenings when stalking rabbits to lie down and wait while a stalk is in progress. Nor does he come to gun-fire, but to a waved handkerchief. Soon he is left to lie down, and we proceed on a long wet crawl. For two hundred yards all goes well, but then comes the crux of the problem, an open space to cross. Five or six of the widgeon are in full view, and we lie still and wait to see if they will not join their fellows under the bank. At length two of them do, but the other four remain obstinately within sight. Then they are joined by others, until finally all the widgeon are out in the middle again. We crawl away, and, going back to where the dog lies, are joined by Farquhar the ghillie. "I thocht ye'd got intae them," said he; but now he agrees that there is nothing for it but to move them. We know this loch well and their line of flight. If Farquhar shows himself on the far shore, the widgeon will rise and fly up the centre of the loch, and their exit to the sea will very likely be made over a couple of small islands. We carry out our plans on this assumption. Farquhar shows himself, I hide behind the larger island, the widgeon rise, but they do not pass over the twin islands at all. Instead they swing back and go out about a hundred and twenty yards wide of Farquhar. They have caused us to lose just fifty-five minutes of the short winter day.

But we will not continue. Suffice it to say that widgeon-shooting on Highland lochs is a very difficult pursuit in which to attain much success. I can conceive it boring the expert marksman, who is no more than marksman, positively to death. "Fun!" remarks such an one—"Fun! I have lain on my stomach in soaking heather and stared at distant ducks through a screen of grass and heather till my eyes ached. I have crawled down a burn and covered my best Purdey gun with moss and grit and scratches. I have fired eight cartridges at an average range of over fifty yards and I have shot two widgeon—as you call them. Let us go home. It has already been raining for three hours."

Although widgeon are very early movers, often leaving their night feeding-grounds just before any sign of dawn, yet they will sometimes

remain resting on lochs until quite late in the day. Why they choose one loch to rest upon and never visit another it is impossible to say, as their choice is often to all appearance quite arbitrary. There are lochs teeming with food and lying between other lochs much favoured by widgeon into which no widgeon will ever come. These are things which no man can explain to the satisfaction of any other man, though he may nurse a theory of his own.

When widgeon arrive, which is in the first week of September, little parties of five or six sometimes go to the inland lochs. I have seen such parties two years running on the first of September on a loch in North Uist. Nor did these birds go to the shore at all during the first few days.

Widgeon are one of the most hopeless of all kinds of ducks to shoot at flight time with any success. They come in very late and go out very early. Often as late as ten o'clock at night the widgeon are still coming in, and in such cases almost the only hope of the shooter is moonlight; and even then, when everything is in the gunner's favour, only an added measure of good fortune can bring him much success.

Sitting out on the flats in some roughly improvised hiding-place for hours at a stretch is cold work in mid-winter, but if the feeding-grounds of the widgeon are at all concentrated, it is well worth a trial. As a rule, however, widgeon feed over wide areas, and though the night-shooter may see fifty and hear two thousand he may not have occasion to fire four times. Yet night-shooting is glorious fun. The sights and the sounds, the swish of wings, the stars, the moonlight, and the excitement are delightful to the lover of nature. What is not so delightful is the rheumatism which too much indulgence in these things brings in later years.

The same may be said in a somewhat lesser degree of another method of widgeon-shooting, and one which offers chances of success less uncertain. This is lying out on promontories.

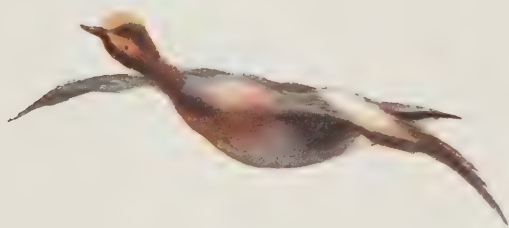
My mind's eye sees at once an island containing five deep bays. At its western end a long headland juts out toward the mainland, here divided by a channel not half a mile in width at full tide, and much less at neap tide. The tide also as it goes back exposes splendid feeding-grounds,

and at all stages widgeon are to be seen there floating on the quiet water, or sitting on the margin of that sleepy western sea.

Given a really rough day, no fowler could ask more than to be ensconced behind the ultimate rock of that promontory, while an attendant or other gunner advancing from the island's eastern end moves all the widgeon up the narrow channel. The persecuted widgeon has the instinct to seek the open sea, and hardly a bird that rises but will fly within a hundred yards of the hiding-place upon the promontory; a good proportion will fly over it. For half an hour there will be probable chances, and for five minutes a hot corner! You may have a dozen or fifteen down before the dog can go to do his part, and then, if only the sea be rough enough outside, the widgeon will come back in little parties and big, higher this time, sometimes so high that a well-killed bird will crash into the water two hundred yards behind the gun that wrought his downfall. This is the "poetry of sport."

In the days of my youth, having read Colonel Hawker's *Instructions to Young Sportsmen*, I was much struck by the crawling-carriage which is figured on page 394 of the sixth edition of that classic book. I had at the time been outwitted during all my earlier Christmas holidays by ever-present but unapproachable companies of widgeon, after which I had carried a huge hired 8-bore until everything but hope had flagged. The hiring of the 8-bore, the ammunition for it, and other incidental expenses had more than made away with my Christmas tips, so that it took time and eloquence to persuade a carpenter, who had allied himself to one of the servants of the house, to form a partnership; he to construct the crawling-carriage for five shillings, to be paid at Easter, and to receive half the bag of ducks and geese which should accrue during the remainder of the holidays. So the carriage was made, and I wheeled it away myself after dark one evening in the rain. Before dawn on the following morning I wheeled it through the sleeping town to the little railway-station, and it was not clear light before it stood on the sands. But it needs description. It was shaped like a wheelbarrow and had in all five wheels—one in front as in a wheelbarrow, the four others where the legs of the wheelbarrow are. It stood a foot from the ground, and its walls stood another foot. These walls were of narrow slats of wood. The system of progression was to

WIDGEON
(*Mareca penelope*)



lie on one's chest in it and kick it along with one's feet, which extended behind. In the garden of the carpenter it had worked, but now I found it very hard to make the seaweed which I hung about the walls stay on; but at length I had tied up my dog on the shore, and set out kicking myself along towards the distant widgeon. The sand was hard, but even then the narrow sheaths of the wheels sank in, and when I was two hundred yards or so away I was joined by my abominable dog, who had bitten himself free and came to me rejoicing. I had, therefore, to rise from the gun-carriage and take the dog back to a farm on the shore, where he was shut into a stable. Then once more to the shore, hot, ruffled, but full of hope. I was half a mile from the widgeon when my gun fell into the sand, and perhaps half that distance when the near wheel came off. But the final debacle was in some soft sand fifty yards or so farther on, where the crawling-carriage stuck hopelessly. There I lay hoping that the widgeon would feed in with the tide. Instead of that they went out to a sandbank, and, all hope gone, I fired the eight-bore at two oyster-catchers and killed one sitting. I gave the oyster-catcher to the carpenter and demanded wider wheels. He inquired when I was returning to school and made various difficulties, such as the cost of wheels and the uncertainty of getting them in time. Five shillings would have saved the situation, but the five shillings were not to be come by. At Easter I saw the body of the crawling-carriage in the carpenter's garden. It was inverted, and a hen was sitting beneath it among some gooseberry bushes. I never saw it again, nor have I since experimented with a crawling-carriage, though I would do so if I had a favourable opportunity. Geese, I think, could be killed in this way, and it would be easy to propel the carriage over the grassy lawns they love. But after one or two shots geese would not allow the carriage within a quarter of a mile.

Another system of approach, sometimes though rarely tried in Britain, is taking cover behind a horse. I have seen this successfully carried out in Spain; but there the *marismas*, which are the haunt of duck and widgeon, are also covered with fighting bulls, horses, and cattle, whereas the spots in Britain where a horse is a common object to wild-fowl, though existent, are not so plentiful. Still, even curlew will let a cart approach in districts where year in, year out, the crofters gather the harvest of seaweed, and in

such places something might be done; but wild-fowl become easily sophisticated and success would not last long, nor would it be very worthy or even interesting save as an experiment, though the opportunities of watching bird-life would be splendid.

After the widgeon comes the mallard, though many will reverse that order, especially as the mallard, or common wild duck, is *the* duck of inland waters as well as a duck of the coast. Personally, I put the widgeon first, although, like other people, I have probably shot ten wild ducks to one widgeon. Far be it from me, therefore, to uphold the widgeon too strenuously.

Some of the finest sport in Britain is to be had with mallard, provided, of course, they are really wild and not the tame birds which swim towards the keeper's wife and refuse to rise and fly, even when the keeper waves his hat among them, shouting. Perhaps they rise and take a short and uneasy flight over the guns, and when fired at seek sanctuary upon the lake by the cottage. These things will happen, but how different is the true wild duck at whom, after the first fortnight in August, you can hardly ever get an easy chance except by skilful manœuvring.

There are many ways in which the mallard may be brought to bag, so many that on a good duck-shoot all of them could not be put into practice on a single day. There is, of course, the morning flight and the evening flight, the ordinary stalk in the reeds, the stalk in the loch, the drive and the waiting, when they fly into the corn. In addition, in stormy weather the mallard often comes to the shore of bays and spends his day upon some pond or pool of brackish water left by the receding tide among the rocks of the coast.

There is a scene which the sight of a mallard often recalls.

It is after breakfast, and two guns are walking beside a stone dyke overlooking a field which, in its turn, abuts upon a loch. Last night, from that loch seven fine trout were taken, and the fisherman as it grew later heard the quacking of mallards in the large area of reeds, an acre or two in extent. It is late August, almost September, and all the month this loch and that patch of reeds have been left as a sanctuary in which the moulting fathers of the race have spent the first week of the month when they cannot fly, and since have hurried to it from all parts of the moor and marsh

surrounding. And now this morning the time has come for them to pay toll for that security.

It is a lovely day, pale blue is the sky, pale green is the turf, dark green the reeds, and dark, dark blue the peaty water which lashes the stony shores driven by the soft wind of the Atlantic. At one end of our loch is the hut of a crofter, its thatched roof surrounded with a necklace of huge stones attached by a rope, and hung there to hold on the thatch when the winter wind raves over the desolate moors. Such a necklace of granite might Ymir, the giant of Niffelheim, have worn and flung as a sign upon this human habitation. At the other end of the loch, and a couple of fields away, the white face of the shooting-lodge is discernible. The ground rises sharply from the loch-side and we two guns take our places, I near the wall, and the other gun behind a hummock opposite the reeds. Then Donald, the ghillie, appears on the farther shore, and untying the boat from its moorings goes aboard. An oar creaks, up gets an old mallard. Straight over the other gun he goes. Bang! It is as if some one had smitten him sharply under the chin; he dies in the air. At the report several ducks rise, seven in all, and four snipe. We fire four barrels, a snipe and a duck bite the dust, both the other gun's. And now Donald reaches the reed-patch. Two drakes come straight to me, low as low grouse. Both fall. They are easy shots. And now the mallards rise in dozens and go over the other gun. Would I were fifty yards on either side of him, for, except that now and then a snipe breaks back, nothing comes my way. But I have the fun of watching. The other gun is shooting quite brilliantly. The ducks rise and pass towering high above him, and in mid-air receive an instantaneous death. At the end I pick up my two mallards, and count six cartridges that spent their charges in the wake of various high snipe without result, while the other gun has ten mallards, a duck, and two snipe. The old birds have paid for their sanctuary.

Next we move on, and passing under the shoulder of the mound, open out a loch surrounded with reeds and indented with bays. At its far end a wall of reeds shows the vicinity of the Big Bog, one of the best wild-fowling grounds in the British Isles. We shall come to it later. At the moment we toss for sides, and it is the other gun who has to cross over, while I remain where I am. He has a full half-mile to go,

and while he is walking let us sit down and take in the prospect. On my side wild tussock-covered land rises from the loch-side to a stone dyke, from which two other stone dykes run down at right-angles to the water. Many a time have those dykes screened the approach of the gunner. In winter this side of the loch is not very good snipe ground, as the reeds are covered with water, and only here and there a few snipe sit in the open on the margin of the loch. But now, in the early autumn, one ought to get a duck or two and some snipe. The farther side, to which my comrade has gone, contains the best snipe ground on the shooting. There, by that low wall, I well remember seeing seven snipe fall ere the gun who wrought their downfall moved from the spot where his first cartridge was fired. Beyond that again is an island, and behind it again the ruins of the old kirk crown a hill, and against the sky one can discern the tombstones of the last century. About it and on the hither side of the hillock are crops of corn in stook, and of potatoes; a flock of plover are sweeping over it, and the air resounds with the shrilling of curlew, of which I can see a flock some five hundred strong sitting on the island below the old kirk. The waters of the loch are lazy with weed, and only here and there does a clear pool show a winking eye to blue heaven. In these pools lie good trout. In fact, one year the score of fish taken from them averaged within an ounce of two pounds apiece.

The other gun, with the attendant figure of the ghillie, has now got round the loch and has begun to walk the outlying snipe ground. He fires two shots and bags the snipe; the first shot puts up a lot of six widgeon from the far end of the loch. They circle back to Dunscaur, the loch of reeds. It is at this moment that a large flight of peewits, and with them fifteen or a dozen golden plover, swing over and settle on the island. I rise and make signs to the other gun, who waves his hand in reply and begins to approach in the direction I indicate. I take out a glass and watch him. I can see the crested heads of the lapwings, but no sign of the golden plover, which are over on the other side of the rise. The other gun crawls up, and I hear both barrels, but it is impossible to see the result or results of the shot. And now we begin to walk our different shores. Here there is a whisp of snipe, there a duck, and a dozen times one sinks down behind the nearest stone or tuft when a curlew

or a flock of plover seems to be approaching. Thus we come to the Big Bog. The Big Bog is a place of memories, thick as currants on a stalk. It was here that Donald, the ghillie of a bygone day, informed one unfortunate sportsman, by whom he was not attracted, but who had rented the place with gold of Glasgow, that "you just went straight forward and it wasna vera deep." History tells how he of Glasgow was hauled out later with ropes.

Indeed, when all is said and done, the Big Bog is a spot where it behoves one to be careful. Into certain parts of it you cannot go; in others you have to pay the price, which means reeking mud to the waist. In the days of my youth I was wont to go straight through it, since at that period of life it is hard to recognise that in snipe and duck shooting, as in other things, physical effort is not everything. How many times, how many hundreds of times, have I not found the air above me torn with complaining snipe, while a dozen mallard and teal sprang from the pools around, just as I sank to my middle in the mud and reeds, and from a hopeless position, one foot perhaps buried twelve or eighteen inches deeper than the other, I fired the hopeless, or almost hopeless, shot, which was often more in the nature of a salute than anything else. Now we rarely walk the Big Bog, but line up instead along the reedy loch shore beneath the old kirk, while David and John, armed with clappers made of packing-case boards, drive the birds over us. By this manœuvre the old peppering or plastering of rising duck is done away with, and though we do not get as many snipe, we often get some "butterflies"—that is, snipe killed literally thirty-five or forty yards up, which come down with wings still spread.

It was in the Big Bog that David the valet, a good sportsman, always ready to get up before daylight to drive geese or to take his chance in the Big Bog, once found himself in a very bad place, the mud up to his shoulders and with a good chance of sinking farther. At his cries I ran to his assistance, and approaching through the reeds saw him striving to lift himself from the clinging mud; and when he failed and paused for breath, I heard the ghillie, who was squatting on his haunches in safety near by, say with an air of finality, "Ay, David man, ye'll never lay a tea again!"

Such is the Big Bog in early autumn when the reeds are green and high, and save for the stream which flows through the centre of it there are but a dozen pools or so. In these pools the mallard, the teal, and the shoveller, of which last there are a good sprinkling, congregate, and stirred from thence by a pair of clappers and a hoarse voice they fly straight down for the loch, and each time the place is driven they fly higher. Later in the year there is no cover, the reeds are brown and beaten by the raving island winds, the bog is flooded, it is deserted by the ducks, but day and night is the home and sanctuary of some hundreds of grey geese, sometimes of bernicle, more rarely of a few white-fronts. At this time of year very few ducks are killed on the Big Bog. He who would be successful there must do his work before the sun is far over the hills, or after it has sunk in the angry sea.

But enough of the Big Bog, and I shall not describe any shooting done there. In an arm of it I remember a very handsome dog belonging to one of my guests being drowned. He swallowed some of the black mud, and, though we got him out, he died. But hitherto the bog has been no murderer, nor has it sucked down a human life.

Very different to the cold long waits when fighting by the pool of the bog are the lovely September evenings spent in the stooks, or better yet in the still standing corn. Here is the perfection of duck-shooting of the contemplative sort. In this kind of shooting I have never, as far as mallard are concerned, pushed an advantage home, though it is different with teal, which all leave later in the year—at least, they certainly do desert the Big Bog.

It is easy enough to recognise when and where ducks are coming into the corn. Feather droppings and the ears destroyed are a certain guide. Give the ducks a week, and then go and sit *back to wind* in the high corn near by. As soon as the crofter or labourer “homeward wends his weary way” the ducks will begin to come in. It is wiser not to fire at the first two parties. Let them pitch. During the whole sunset hour the ducks will continue to come in, and you can make the shooting as easy or as difficult (both within limits) as you will. The birds will, however much they circle, settle finally against the wind. This is the moment at which to kill all wild birds if a big bag be your

object. The huge bags of wood-pigeons are ninety per cent. filled within twenty yards of the branch or spot on which they had determined to alight. But with ducks, if you want difficult shooting, turn the other way and face up-wind. The ducks will come in very fast, will sweep in, in fact, ere they turn into the wind to steady themselves, and from your cramped position you will need all the quick swing you can command to bring them down. It is glorious sport. A blue evening sky, the rippling, waving corn, the gloom that precedes night makes a dusk upon the shores of the loch, the swish of wings, the solid face and deep-brown eyes of the old dog, about whom you have no illusions, or the brighter eyes of the young one, concerning whom you perchance have many, and when the sun is long gone and the ducks become dark cloves against the patches of fading brightness. And now that it is dark, you can hear the ducks, you can see them no longer. You rise; you have fifteen gathered, and two you think are down, which were too far off to send the dog for during the flight. You send him now. He succeeds and retrieves both. Then, heavily laden, but ballasted with a great content, you walk off to the Lodge. Long lies the way, for you have to skirt great areas of marsh.

Once, after a late September corn-shoot, a thick fog came down, and it took two hours of feeling and touching to find the path; but to-night it is clear, the stars are out, the smoke of peat redolent of many memories arises from the cottages, and presently a hot bath and a glass of sherry complete the perfection of content. At dinner you discuss the morrow's plans. Shall we have the boat and go to Deasker or Causamull, or even distant Haskeir, where dwell the mighty seals, or shall we try the inland heather country, or the geese upon the promontory ponds? Shall we get up at four, or shall we leave it till after breakfast? These are the discussions over the coffee. And then a pipe in the moonlight among the midges, and so to bed to dream until we arise on the morrow.

Forgotten is London and the smell of asphalt, the desk is a far-off memory, the newspaper comes like a message from a forgotten state of things. It is rarely necessary to write a letter, and hands hardened with gun and sail and oar close clumsily upon the pen. All this is good, and in it we forget the day when the collars will be put on the dogs and the luggage on the cart, while we, mounting the trap, shall drive through

the plover-haunted land past the isle of Kirkibost, the isle of geese, and then, turning, leave behind the open sandy lands and plunge into the dark hills, and so steering by the grim Mount Eval come to Lochmaddy, a kind of Venice of the Hebrides, in that men and women visit it by boat, and there, after hearing who has caught what at the hotel, aboard the steamer for eighteen hours of the Minch and ocean. It has its uses, even this journey, for it takes the mind from what one is leaving. Late the next night, perchance, as one drives through the lighted streets and sees the placards of London and the white faces, the hum, the roar, the ten thousand solicitations of shop and theatre, one goes back in thought—the Lodge is dark, the little round grass patch in front is soaked in dew, the loch reflects the stars. Far up, far up beneath them the grey geese are fighting from Cuirheara.

COMMON HERON

(*Ardea cinerea*)



PLATE 112

THE UNPROTECTED COMMON SEAL

It is a perfect day in August—a day upon which the worst of sailors might even enjoy the crossing of the terrible Little Minch, that dread threshold to the delights of the Outer Hebrides. In these islands of Britain, we are—some of us, at any rate—forced to pay for our pleasures : the North Sea guards the reindeer and the salmon, the elk and the trout of Norway; the Irish Sea the snipe and woodcock of Kerry and Mayo; but neither can promise a more appalling experience than the Little Minch on a really stormy day.

Well can I remember standing on the deck of the *Flowerdale*—strangely inappropriate name!—as we heaved and tossed off Ardnamurchan, when a voice, one of two that were carrying on a conversation behind me, said :

“ When he got sae far, he wouldn gae on and face it. He left the steamer at Canna, and was housed for sax days in a croft. Oh, man, there’s that in the Minch that would drrive a Navy sailor frae his food ! ”

But to return. The scene on which we look is not the Minch, but the Atlantic, over which in their season rave the winds that rock the world. To-day it is peaceful. The blue sea breaks in white creamings on the white sands, there is a glitter on the waters, Heiskeir and the Monach Isles are half lost in the heat-haze, and the lighthouse thereon seems to have no base, but to be a fairy palace suspended in the air.

Take a glass and let us see what moves upon the face of the waters, while we lie in comfort on the scented dunes to focus the telescope.

Let us begin with Hanglun, that promontory which forms the southern horn of the bay. There are some curlews on the farther side; the glass shows the hunched outlines of four. Probably there are more out of sight. A huge black-backed gull is sitting on the beacon which has been raised above high-water mark, and there are both oyster-catchers

and redshanks in the miniature bays running by the edge of the tide. Off the end of the point, an eider duck with a family of eight is sending the calm water in ripples from her breast.

Next we flash the glass for a moment on Langashkeir—a low skerry, haunted by grey seals. It is a mile and a half away, and almost shut in by the haze. Skerelebaun comes next, some half-mile out. There are many cormorants ranged upon it, and—stop!—what is that thing like a gigantic yellow slug, which sprawls on the seaweed shelf? A seal (*Phoca vitulina*)—not a grey seal, but a common seal, so called (though there is, nowadays, a sad dwindling in their numbers). And that is not the only one, since careful observation enables us to make out four more. They have all been there for some considerable time, for their skins are dry. Now there is another approaching the rock. With two quick jerks he throws himself out of the sea and takes his place beside the rest. He is just like a black slug, and not until he dries—which will take from forty to sixty minutes—shall we be able to tell his true colour.

It is very interesting to lie here and watch the seals. How many days have we passed in such employment! Yet the best opportunity we ever had was on the first day we came here—now twelve years ago. We had made the horrid journey, starting from London on Thursday night, Oban at noon on Friday, the *Flowerdale* at 6 a.m. on Saturday, our island port at ten that night, and the seventeen-miles drive with the plover and the curlew crying from the fields beside the road, or through the silence of the moorlands—a silence only broken by the whistling of the wind in the telegraph wires. And so on to our arrival at 4 a.m.; then sleep till lunch, and after that a walk to this spot.

Do you see that little rock there? Yes, that one not a hundred and fifty yards away. The tide was out, and only touched it on the side facing the sea. Well, upon that rock, on that Sunday of long ago, lay thirteen seals—most of them huge old males—and we lounged among the bent-grass and watched them all the afternoon. Those were the days when I longed above all things to shoot a seal—a desire now passed away. But curiously enough, never did I see seals again occupy that rock until 1912.

To return. The seals on Skerelebaun will be interesting, presently,

for the tide is rising. They have all clambered or flippered, or whatever may be the correct term to describe the land-progress of a seal, to the highest point of that outlying part of the rock, and lie there in the attitude of riflemen about to shoot from the recumbent position. Presently, the water reaches them; one by one they float off until the big old bull alone is left. He arches himself into a bow, only his head above water; then it becomes too deep for him, and he joins the other doglike heads swimming round the rock.

In this bay the seals have regular routes, which they usually follow when fishing. Thus a seal appearing to the north, off Paible Head, will almost always fish right in-shore and pass between the rock on which we saw them that first Sunday, and another upon its landward side. The channel between these two rocks is a very favourite fishing-place, for the fishing seal will often come up two or three times in passing through it—sometimes with a fish, that it devours before it dives again.

I have read a great deal about the length of time a seal can remain under water, and have seen accounts of seals staying submerged for over ten and even fifteen minutes. This may be so. Personally, I have never timed a seal to remain under more than four and a quarter minutes. But this refers to undisturbed seals. On the other hand, when a seal has been frightened, he is very apt to put only his nose above water, and that for a very brief instant, so that the rise may very easily be missed—more particularly if there be any ripple whatsoever upon the water.

Common seals are very widely distributed round our coasts. My own experience of them has extended (I refer only to *Phoca vitulina*) to the Northumbrian coast, North Uist, Skye and Harris in the Hebrides, the Orkneys and Shetland Isles, and many spots upon the west coast of Ireland. The same animal is also plentiful in the Newfoundland bays, and is known as the harbour seal; also in the fiords of Labrador, where it is abnormally wild owing to the ceaseless persecution it undergoes from both the Eskimo and the white settlers, to whom the skin is of great value. It penetrates up the rivers far into the Labrador peninsula; and when exploring the Fraser River in that country, a few years ago, we saw (and chased without success) a common seal which had travelled over many rapids into the higher waters of the river. The failure to kill this seal was

attended by regrettable consequences, as an Eskimo we had in our service became so homesick for the coast at sight of it that he deserted during the night, and returned to his home beside the salt water. In Norway, *Phoca vitulina* is well known, though there also it is very wild and hard to approach—as it may well be, since it is pursued with great diligence by professional hunters. Yet its value—except in Labrador, where the skin is used for the making of boots and the flesh to nourish the Eskimo—is small, ten to eighteen shillings being about the highest figure.

As a sporting beast, a worthy quarry for the big-game shooter, the common seal, under certain circumstances, stands quite high. It should never be shot in the water, except when it is killed as vermin at the mouth of salmon-rivers or in the neighbourhood of nets. In the water, where it has not been much persecuted, the common seal is apt to allow its bump of curiosity to overcome its instinctive fear of man. It will rise and stare at a boat again and again, sometimes venturing quite close. Similarly, when bathing in Balranald Bay, I have often had seals all round me, and they occasionally accompany a walker on the tide-edge right along the strand at a distance of one or two hundred yards out in the ocean. The seal is supposed to be a very musical animal and to draw near and appreciate the playing of musical instruments or of singing, but this is probably but another phase of its curiosity.

There are other reasons why it is a pity to shoot common seals in the water. The most important of these is the number of seals which sink at once when killed, and are lost. The sinking of the carcass is by no means certain, as the animal is undoubtedly more buoyant than the grey seal (*Halichoerus grypus*); and whether it sinks immediately or not depends largely upon the position in which the animal is swimming when it receives its death-wound. If it happens to be swimming *along* the surface, as a man swims, it will generally float—especially if it be shot soon after rising from a dive when its lungs are still full of unused air. If, on the other hand, it is in what may be called the “treadwater” position, it will—particularly if it has been up long enough to have expended the air in its lungs—sink at once. But if—except when the animal is shot in the interests of salmon-protection—a rule is made never to shoot a common seal in the water, very little harm will be done to the species by sportsmen;

for once on a rock, the seal becomes an exceedingly difficult creature to approach.

To attempt to approach within shot of a basking seal down-wind is hopeless; for a seal has a nose which is rather keener than that of red deer. It also has excellent ears—indeed, considering the creature is amphibious and that the sounds which herald human approach are duplicated in nature by the sound of the sea moving shingle or lapping against the rocks, it is wonderful how slight a noise will ruin a stalk. The eyesight of *Phoca vitulina* is not particularly developed in British waters—the reason for this being that here it has not many enemies, but in Norway or Labrador a very different state of things exists.

To digress a moment. A great deal of what is written about the powers of sight of various animals seems to be founded on a false basis. The meaning of this perhaps somewhat categorical statement is most easily demonstrated by an example. The caribou of Newfoundland is supposed to have poor sight, and it is a fact that they do not use their eyes as they should. Once the wind is right, approaching a big stag is not in that country really difficult or troublesome. But, on the other hand, the same animal three hundred miles north in Labrador is very quick-sighted. The reason for this is a simple one. In Labrador the caribou must always be keeping a look-out for wolves, which yearly destroy a great number of their does and fawns, and often enough the big stags also. In Newfoundland, however, the bounty offered by the late Judge Prowse, under the direction of the Government, has resulted in all the wolves being killed off, so that over the wide barrens the caribou now roam without fear of molestation save by the rifles of the hunters white and red. There are in this grand country—which comprises the whole of central Newfoundland—but few hunters, and hundreds of thousands of caribou. Continued immunity from pursuit has caused their once ceaseless watchfulness to abate, so that now, when a caribou is feeding, he is only feeding, instead of feeding and watching at the same time as in the old days. So, through long-continued disuse, the power of his vision has grown dull. Now just as the caribou is practically free from molestation in Newfoundland, so is the seal on many parts of the British coasts. In Labrador, where the Eskimo slay him at the edge of the ice,

he is quick enough to perceive danger; but in British waters a large percentage of seals live and die without much threat of danger, and their quickness of eyesight has suffered in consequence.

On the other hand, the reason why a basking seal is so ready to take alarm, conveyed by sound or smell, is that on land no seal feels safe; he is always nervous. This is not to be wondered at, seeing how handicapped he is on *terra firma*. In the water he knows his own powers and feels comparatively secure. Thus very rarely indeed do seals lie up on rocks which can be reached from the land through shallows; some low skerry, half a mile from shore, is usually the selected spot, and for no apparent rhyme or reason seals will use one skerry to the exclusion of others which seem just as, or even more, suitable. Thus in the three bays, of which Skerelebaun is the central point, and where on most days one can see twenty to thirty seals, there are in all only seven skerries on which they are in the habit of basking. At least ten times this number of skerries exist in the bays, but the seal is a conservative creature. "My fathers did this, gentlemen, and so shall I," is his motto.

Another point in favour of the seal is the exceedingly clumsy craft, which are the only ones that can generally be obtained in which to hunt him. This is, at any rate, true of the Outer Hebrides, where on the western coasts of North Uist there are not half a dozen boats all told, and often only one of these is in commission. The boatmen there make their living by catching lobsters, and unless a considerable sum is offered prefer to prosecute their own trade rather than embark shooting-tenants to hunt seals. Their ideas of approach are very elementary, and they talk and rattle the oars at the psychological moment in a maddening fashion. Also with their heavy craft it is often impossible to land on the smaller rocks. In recalling the attempts undertaken in the Paible lobster-boat, the retrospect is one of almost unrelieved failure.

There is one skerry much beloved of seals, from which a shot may be obtained, or perhaps it should be said might be obtained. On this one August day, seven seals, including some fine old males, had been descried. No shot had, so far, been fired that year nearer than the far side of Hanglun Point; so we put to sea in the lobster-boat with high hopes. The wind was right, the tide low, and very propitious for a successful landing. I

will not take my readers over the whole approach nor describe how artfully some curlew, that were in the way of the stalk, had to be moved; nor how only the most definite words prevailed in preventing the lobster-fishers from closing in upon the covering rock with masts up—a vigorous advertisement of our progress. All these things, however, were done, and it only remained to pour a continuous stream of water upon the rowlocks to prevent squeaking. Then a jump on to seaweed, a slip of one's light tennis-shoes, a recovery, and while the boatmen break out into hoarse and bearded whispers—harmless only because the wind is strong in their faces—we creep into position. This is what we see. Divided from us only by two hundred yards of water, the seals are lying—some near the tide, others higher on the rock. Upon its very highest pinnacle are two bulls, which surpass all the others in size. Both are dry and have been long out of the water. There is, of course, a strong temptation to shoot, lest something untoward occur. We look back. The lady in the boat has somehow or other reduced the boatmen to silence. All is right in that quarter, so I—who am to shoot—use the glass. I have never at this time shot a seal, but I have graduated in a good enough school to be aware that the best in view is the *only* permissible mark, so I examine the seals with great care. One, the lower, is a fine big seal of the black and white variety of colour; the one on the summit of the rock is a heavier brute, and has that yellowish tinge in his colouring which many of the old males on this coast seem to attain. His head is resting on the rock, his under-jaw and neck sprawled out. He is every inch of a hundred and eighty yards away—probably he is a little over two hundred. I cock the Mauser '275, put my cap under my hand to lessen the upward jump of the rifle—for a rifle which touches rock throws high. Then I get the sight on the seal.

I have been told and know that the brain of a seal lies far back, almost in the neck, and for this I aim. But before I can shoot, the big yellow bull lifts his head and keeps moving it. I have a mark of about six inches to aim for, and now that the seal's head is up, the possible chance of ricochet off the rock, in case I shoot low, has gone. The heat haze dances, and I feel it is a hundred chances to one against my lonely bullet ever finding its billet. The rifle shakes, too, not from any buck fever, but

from the effort to concentrate. And then I am aware that the seal's neck and the white bead on the rifle are in line. Another second and the die is cast, the bullet has gone upon its way. On my retina are visualised half a dozen badly frightened seals hurling themselves towards the water, as many pops like drawn corks as they plunge in and are swallowed up. But on the top of the rock the place of the old yellow bull is empty. His is one of the swimming heads that just show ere they depart. I have missed, and I shake my head abjectly at the boat. The sun is clouded with disappointment. I allow myself no excuse. I have missed a fair point-blank chance at a range at which in practice I would probably have scored a hit.

That was over twenty years ago. Looking back at it now, I am aware that few marks in the whole realm of big-game shooting are so difficult as the head or neck shot at a seal at anything over a hundred yards. To kill a stag is child's play to it; even a moufflon offers a mark three times the size. Consider, after all, that you are shooting at a mark about the size of a curlew, an object against a background of almost the same colour as itself. It is this extra difficulty that demands the necessity for a high quality of marksmanship. To shoot a seal anywhere but in the brain is useless and cruel; a chance shot might smash its backbone and render it incapable of movement, but the heart-shot would not have the same result. Certainly not always. A stag with his heart shot to pieces will often run a hundred or more yards full speed before he falls never to rise again. Similarly, a seal shot through the heart can, and will nearly always in its final effort, reach the water. Only once did I see the carcass of a seal shot through the body recovered. It was lying some fifteen yards from the sea on the top of a rock, and the bullet struck it fairly enough through the heart; for all that it reached the water, and was only picked up at low tide by a lucky chance. So it is clear that it is absolutely necessary to shoot a seal in the brain if one wishes to secure the skin.

When the Grey Seals Protection Bill was down for its second reading—a matter with which Mr. Reginald Smith of the *Cornhill Magazine* and Mr. Charles Lyell, M.P. had a great deal to do—both they and I were continually told that seals did so much damage that our efforts were wrong-headed and not in accordance with the public weal.

It is even rumoured that a certain M.P. had made up his mind to block the Bill because a sporting constituent of his had assured him that the seals did a lot of harm to the fishermen's nets and to the fish in his salmon-river. The fact that the grey and the common seals are two quite distinct animals with quite different habits and a quite different habitat, and that one attains three times the size of the other, had not dawned upon this doughty champion of the *Salmonidæ*; but all's well that ends well, and the Bill was not blocked. I may mention at once that the facts of the above case came to me through channels entirely separate from and unknown to the chief promoters of the Bill.

The truth is that the grey seal very rarely, if ever, does appreciable harm to salmon-rivers. He dwells on wild islets and skerries out in the ocean, and it is only now and again that a young bull, driven away by the big males at mating-time, comes in fishing off the mainland. Of the total damage done to salmon by seals, 99 per cent. and more is due to *Phoca vitulina*. The common seal is indeed a creature of the coast, of the bays and the estuaries, and, though in this I stand open to correction, I have never seen one very far from land. The deep-sea rocks have no attraction for them. I have met with single specimens fishing three or four miles out in the sea, never farther.

Another very definite difference between the grey seal and the common seal lies in their breeding-times. The grey seal brings forth her young in October, upon isolated rocks, and the pups cannot swim for three weeks; whereas the common seal's young are born about May, and can swim from birth.

In shallow water, I have occasionally seen grey and common seals together, but this was probably accidental. Individuals of both species happened to be fishing in the same vicinity, and the distribution of fish caused them to try the same water.

A common seal which attains a length of six feet from the top of its teeth to the end of its hind flippers is a very large specimen, and should weigh somewhere about two hundred pounds; whereas a grey seal may measure eleven feet, and weigh six hundred or six hundred and fifty pounds, some say even more.

At mating-time the bull seals do a great deal of fighting, but their

battles are rarely, if ever, fatal. Not often, either, are they observed by human eyes. The scars of teeth and nails on the skins form our best evidence as to their severity, for a seal is after all a very powerful animal. One time or another most seal-shooters have had to swim to retrieve their quarry. I have often done so, both after seals I have myself killed in the water and those shot by others; and my emphatic advice is to make sure before approaching the seal that it is dead. Remember that a seal shot in the water is shot in the head and neck, and unless the aim is not only true but also fortunate, the bullet is apt to glance and to stun instead of to kill. If a stunned seal recovered consciousness to find himself clasped to the pink breast of a human being, who, swimming on his back, was trying to tow the seal ashore, it would probably resent any such attempt and take strong measures to ensure escape. A seal's teeth are sharp and incurved, and his flippers no bad weapons of defence, and the result would probably be a nasty wound if no more.

The common seal, as an article of diet, is not eaten in this country, although a decoction made of its oil is numbered among the local remedies in use on the far western Celtic fringe. It is taken both internally as well as used externally for rheumatism. In Labrador, on the other hand, *Phoca vitulina* is a much-prized delicacy, especially the flippers. Like our grouse and pheasants, these are cooked after being "hung." In 1910, a flipper was "hung" so effectually by an old Inuit lady that neither she nor the guests she invited to partake of it survived the meal. I myself have attempted seal; but, though in good training and hungry with a twenty-mile walk and a hunter's appetite, I was unable to swallow it. It tasted rather, I imagine, as a badly cured oilcloth might taste.

The skinning of seals is an art in itself, and a large one will give a man three or four hours' work. This, of course, means that the man in question shall skin away the blubber and not leave it as does the Newfoundland sealer. To him the blubber and the skin are both valuable, and he cuts them away from the body with a few well-directed slashes.

All seal-hunters should be able to skin their own seals, as they may be called upon to do so by lack of other help; though all over the west of Ireland and Scotland and in the Hebrides men can be found who will do it after a fashion for a fee.

Never shall I forget the insight into the character of my Irish fellow-countrymen that a certain episode connected with seal-skinning gave me. It occurred several years ago, on the last occasion on which I shot common seals. Some skins were wanted for illustration purposes, and I had promised to get them if I could. During the day my luck had been extraordinary, and everything had "come off." The result was that about four o'clock on a frosty February afternoon, we made harbour just as the sun was sinking behind the bald green hills, with four seals in the boat. The boatmen, being asked if there were a seal-skinner in the village, offered to do the job themselves.

"What do you expect to be paid?"

"Ten shillings, sorr. There does be a deal of work on them great big brutes."

"All right."

I then went up to the hotel and had some tea. Half an hour later, I came down to see if the boatmen were skinning properly. To my surprise, I found them both gone and an unknown humpbacked man at work.

"Where are the boatmen?"

"They're after going home, yer honour. They got me hired to finish skinning out the bastes."

"What are they going to pay you?"

"Five shillings, yer honour."

After assuring myself that the new hand was capable, I went back to the hotel, but returned to the beach in the twilight.

The five-shilling man had disappeared. He had sublet the skinning to two gawky youths, and had engaged to pay them a shilling each.

About seven o'clock, I came out for the last time, and found *two old women* skinning. They were working by the light of an old oil-lamp in an empty shed. They had taken over the reversion of the seal-skinning, and were to be paid *threepence* each!

Next morning, I examined the skins. They were quite well done in spite of the large and varied staff that had expended their efforts upon them. It was all very Irish indeed; and when I told the boatmen that in future I should employ the two old women direct, they produced the most fantastic excuses: told me that had they had any idea that the

humpback would lease the job, they would have remained themselves until it was finished, even if by so doing they suffered financially in a high degree. When it came to payment, I gave them half-a-crown each and the extra half-crown to the old women.

They accepted the decision with good-humour, even indeed with humour, and promptly offered me the use of their boat on the morrow at half-price. The truth was they were very much afraid that I would employ the rival boat, and they one and all loved sport. I had, however, made up my mind not to shoot any more common seals, and at the announcement of this resolution the boatmen became very dejected. They did not believe me in the least; and when I left, presently, on a side-car, one of them said, "Well and all, God bless your honour when you do be shooting the seals in the south."

But since that day, now many years ago, the common seals have been unmolested as far as I am concerned, and will probably be in the future. Yet, in a way, I regret that my seal-shooting days are over, for the pursuit of seals takes the hunter into the most delightful surroundings and the sport is of a high class. Picture some Hebridean sound dotted with green islands and weed-hung skerries. Mallard, widgeon, sheldrake, and countless waders are to be seen on all sides. The tide is high, and we have landed on the main skerry. At the northern end, now beneath the waters, is situated a rock on which the seals often come up to bask. This rock is about four hundred yards away, and only as the tide recedes shall we be able to approach it. So we wait and watch. We watch the sail of a distant boat beating out to sea, we watch a splendid eider drake fishing in the main channel. From some loch in the hills we hear the clamour of grey geese, and so the time passes until seal after seal goes up on the rock. In old days the big bulls would have excited us, but now that peace has been declared between us, we watch them lazily and pick out the line of stalk that might have been.

Presently, there are twenty-three seals up, the rock is covered with them, and five or six are keeping a good look-out. They have been shot at several times this year by the tenant of a neighbouring lodge and are very wideawake. The desire to try our luck, and to see if the approach is possible, becomes strong. We decide to do so, but armed with a

RICHARDSON'S SKUA
(*Stercorarius parasiticus*)

PLATE 100



Brown Booby

stick instead of a rifle, and the stalk begins. First, the way lies round the back of the island, then behind a sheltering ridge of rock. This is easy; and now within two hundred and fifty yards of the seals the real thing begins. There are crawls through six inches of sea-water, long wormings over seaweed almost within sight of the quarry, and much worse circlings over tracts sown with boulders and pebbles. Then we reach a point of vantage within a hundred and fifty yards of the seals. From here a shot might be taken, but sixty yards onward is a much better place. We set forth to attain it, but between us and it lies difficult ground. We are in the middle of this when we are aware of a tremendous series of splashes, and we know that something has gone wrong: the seals have seen us or heard us, and we have failed. We sit up rather ruefully and watch the dark heads rising. We wring the water out of our clothes, go back to the mainland, build a little fire, boil a kettle of tea (for a midday lunch without tea is to us "Hamlet" without the Prince of Denmark), and watch the clouds drifting.

In St. John's *Wild Sports of the Highlands* I find the following :

"A farmer, near the coasts here, seeing several [seals] basking on the sandbanks, and not being possessed of a gun, hit upon what seemed to him the excellent plan of setting a strong bull-dog at them, hoping that the dog would hold one of them till he could get up and kill it with his spade. The dog reached the seals before they could get to the water, and attacked one of the largest. The seal, however, with a single bite, completely smashed the head of the dog, and, flinging him to one side, scuffled away into the water, leaving the farmer not much inclined to attempt seal-hunting again."

One remark in this account of St. John's is of interest, and that is that he describes the seals as "basking on a sandbank." On the west coast, I have never seen a seal take the sand; and, probably, counting one time with another, I have seen some thousands of seals. On the east coast, however, I believe, seals do lie upon the sandbanks and may often be seen doing so.

On the whole, in spite of the damage he does, when everything is

considered, it can hardly be doubted that the time has come when something ought to be done for the protection of the common seal. It is not fair to any species of animals to leave them without protection in these days of accurate small-bore rifles. Unlike the grey seal, the common seal causes no trifling harm to nets and to fish, but his depredations in the sea must be inconsiderable compared to those of which cormorants are guilty. In the estuaries, and within a certain limit of the neighbourhood of nets, no protective measure need apply, and in fact it would probably be better to create reserves where *Phoca vitulina* can be permitted to exist in peace. There are many islands in the Orkneys, the Shetlands, and the Hebrides where the seals congregate in some numbers, and where they can do no harm. At present, a great many unnecessary shots are fired at seals, and they are growing fewer and fewer. The case for their protection is not yet a crying necessity as was the protection of grey seals, and it is likely that a sweeping enactment would meet with opposition; whereas local protection is both feasible and wise. It would be a sad pity if the common seal disappeared, as he inevitably must do unless some steps in his favour are taken. At present he is an Ishmaelite; for how often do we read something of this sort in our daily press :

“ A SEAL OFF BRIGHTON PIER

“ Yesterday afternoon a seal was observed by a number of persons from Brighton Pier. The creature, that was at one time within fifty yards of the structure, seemed quite tame, and appeared to be attracted by the strains of the band. The news of its presence becoming known in the town, two or three local sportsmen [*sic*] set out in a boat armed with guns, and finally a shot was obtained, after which the animal disappeared. It is thought the seal, which was about four feet in length, was killed and must have sunk.”

The much likelier probability is, of course, that the seal was badly peppered or perhaps blinded, and escaped to die or recover as the case may be.

Absolute protection might be given to all seals on the English coast without the very smallest fear of bad results ; indeed, on the contrary, the

presence of such few seals as might come round our watering-places would give tourists a new and interesting sight.

All things considered, however, the obvious solution of the question of the protection of seals lies in the establishment of sanctuaries and reserves, or else in the provision of a close-time extending over the months between April and October inclusive; such close-time, however, not to take effect in estuaries or in the vicinity of certain rivers and districts to be named in a schedule to the Act.

Although the common seal exists in far greater numbers than the grey seal, we must always remember that, inhabiting as it does estuaries and quiet waters, it is much more open to successful attack. On the other hand; as the common seal does not, as does the grey seal, establish itself on rocks at breeding-time, it cannot be clubbed. The most part of the seals killed during the year fall victims to the rifle or the shot-gun, and it is to be feared that the latter weapon has blinded many a wretched animal. To shoot at a seal with a shot-gun loaded with small shot is an action the cruelty of which is only equalled by its abominable stupidity. Unless the seal is very close—for this kind of shot can only be taken from a boat at a seal rising suddenly within a short distance—it is a thousand to one that the creature will not be killed, yet a hundred to one it will be hit by the scattering charge. The result is pitiful; the wretched seal, blinded, cannot find its food, the fish elude it and finally it dies of starvation. Yet how often do considerations of this kind prevent the firing of a shot? In such matters as this there is unquestionably a foolish and harmful impulse seemingly ineradicable in a certain kind of man. This impulse has its root in ignorance, and is, I fear, rarely controlled by those who are only shooters as opposed to naturalists and sportsmen. I use this latter term in its original sense of a man who is *baqueano*, as the Spaniards say, *i. e.* a master of his craft, one who is cognisant of and abides by the laws of sport, and not as the word “sportsman” has lately been used as a sort of pseudonym for the gay and high-spirited watcher of League football. The shooter’s love of shooting begins and ends with dealing death in a manner more or less skilful or unskilful, whereas to the sportsman a day that produces but four or five shots, or with a rifle no shot at all, may be one to mark with a red letter.

I well remember one hardy Scottish hunter, a man as adamantine as the rock on which the foundation of his house stood, who, literally for years, would rise for snipe-shooting long before the dawn, walk ten miles to his ground, and sit by the roadside, or upon a milestone, till the light became strong enough to shoot by—surely a very knight of candle-light rising! This man killed great bags of snipe, woodcock, geese, ducks, and widgeon; and meeting him ten years after our first acquaintance, I asked him about the progress of his life's passion.

"I shoot no geese nor snipe now," said he. "In fact, I have given up the shot-gun altogether. The rifle's the weapon. Why, man, the post-mortem's so much the more interesting!"

Such men do not shoot at seals with shot-guns. This gentleman was a true sportsman in that a bird that went away wounded and which he did not recover would cloud his satisfaction all the evening.

Finally, here is a story of the war, which would not be well regarded by the Prussians, who have, we are led to understand, undertaken this war in part with the hope of delivering the world from the ideals of the British sportsman, in order to replace them by that *Kultur* which is the birthright and monopoly of the "children of Odin." A young British officer, wounded in the thighs, announced the fact in a letter thus:

"Dear ——, — Both legs down. Coming home with the Pick-up."

PTARMIGAN

THE ptarmigan owes much of the security which he enjoys to the red deer. All through the stalking season he cannot be hunted, because the firing would disturb the high ground sacred to the big stags. Hard and barren as are his surroundings, it is surprising that he does not increase in numbers, or rather that he did not before the war, when vermin were killed down more completely than is now the case.

During the war the ptarmigan had a bad time, and no doubt great numbers were killed by foxes; but this does not appear to have made much difference, and if one could only shoot the ground, it would be possible to-day to make as big a bag of ptarmigan as ever it was.

Like many other men, I have seen an immense number of ptarmigan and shot very few. Abroad I once made a journey across the great table-land of Labrador, where often a single ptarmigan alone stood between our little party and hunger. The curious thing about the ptarmigan which we met on that journey was their extreme wildness, especially on windy days. We used a .22 rifle to shoot them with, and when the wind was blowing high it was extremely difficult to get a shot at all; in fact, except in the lee of some great basaltic fragment, the birds rose and flew at eighty yards.

On a still evening all this was quite changed, and I remember once, when we were fishing, my comrade, Gathorne Hardy, spotted a ptarmigan and left me to look after it and keep my eye on it while he went back to camp and brought the rifle. So I was left alone to contemplate the shades of evening with the ptarmigan. It was a very peaceful evening, only spoiled by several million mosquitoes. I remember that when my friend returned my first intimation of his approaching presence was gained from a great pillar of these mosquitoes which towered high in the air above him, so that before his head appeared over the skyline, I knew that something living, either man or caribou, was on the move.

When my friend arrived, I pointed out the ptarmigan which I was "minding," whereupon he stalked and killed it.

At one time or another we saw a good many coveys on the table-land, but we only killed eight. Still, in a hunger-march of this kind, eight ptarmigan are not to be despised.

However, to change the scene from Labrador to Scotland—and if you were put down suddenly without knowing where you were, you might easily mistake one country for the other—I was once stalking on the hills in Inverness-shire, from which it is said that on a clear day you can see the sea both east and west. We had spotted our stag long before, not a particularly exciting animal, but a distinctly shootable beast: black in colour, and with a heavy head of six or eight points.

I was at the time utterly unfit, being only just out of hospital, so that I was quite grateful when a volume of mist appeared over the hill. We went forward in the direction of the stag for some time, and then lay down behind a rock to wait for the weather to clear. The old stalker evidently was not sure that this would happen, for he kept on looking to windward and shaking his head mournfully. At first, all around was silent, and then quite close we heard the croaking cry of ptarmigan, which was repeated from lower down the hill. There could be little doubt that there were two or three coveys quite close to us, and though we could see nothing of them a bird here and there kept on calling. . . . At length, after we had waited about half an hour—to be exact, thirty-five minutes—the wind rolled away the mist, leaving the sun to shine down with all his northern power upon the huddle of mountains and the great green corrie at our feet.

My first glance was for the stag, and there he was right beneath us, about five hundred yards away. I was in full view, so I did not move but sat still as the stones that strewed the hillside. Then ten yards from me on my left front was a covey of nine ptarmigan, and not much farther off, straight ahead, another of eleven. I could not count them at once, because they were among the grey stones with which they harmonise so well, but as time passed the birds became distinct. To get away without disturbing them was almost impossible. Anyhow, we sat for a few minutes looking down on the scene. In the course of my travels

PTARMIGAN
(*Lagopus mutus*)



I have looked upon many a wild and beautiful scene : the Andes rising thousands of feet above the lakes which lie at their base, with the immense forests of black antarctic beech which clothe their slopes mirrored in the lakes; the great icebergs which float upon these lakes. That is a beautiful scene, but like the fiords of Norway, or the huge cliffs of Labrador, its sense of vastness is too great.

But Scotland is quite different, and there is a friendliness about her hills and glens which in these other vaster lands is quite absent.

As we crawled away we put up one of the coveys, which disappeared round the knoll with its curious diving flight. The other covey meantime had run out of sight. Whenever I think of ptarmigan that scene comes back to me. I do not know what is the record bag of ptarmigan, but he is essentially the bird for an off day. No one wants to kill many ptarmigan, indeed, few people invade his solitudes, where he lives more or less a haunted life, crouching under the eye of birds of prey, and often hunted in that particular glen of which I write by the golden eagle.

The actual shooting of ptarmigan is usually easy, but a high wind makes them rise, as I have said, wild. They have also a habit of flying across from one high top to another, a matter of a few moments to them, but entailing perhaps a two hours' climb to whoever is pursuing them. They have exactly the same habit on the grey rolling table-land of Labrador, where they will fly from ridge to ridge in a manner that will soon tire one out. In fact, in Scotland, ptarmigan shooting generally consists of few shots and far between. The coveys are sometimes, however, very considerate, and fly round the same top instead of launching themselves into space. I do not think there is any bird which can be more considerate or more exasperating.

On some days everything is easy, on others, each flight of the birds is made as though they had an uncanny knowledge of the disabilities of man. Sometimes it is possible to drive ptarmigan, but as far as my experience goes, this is merely a matter of getting one or two shots. The line of flight of a covey is by no means certain, and the deer-stalkers do not pay much attention to its direction. Why should they? It is only once in three years or so that some crack-brained sportsman desires a day's ptarmigan shooting after the stalking season. Still, these

impromptu drives are, to my mind, more interesting than the set drives of the lower lands. I yield to no one in my joy in a day's ptarmigan driving, for—especially as I grow older—my mind goes back with just as much, perhaps more, pleasure to the little days, when one lurked behind a rock and a single attendant drove the top.

GREY GEESE

I

IN the Outer Hebrides grey geese are still resident, though, it is said—and, alas, possibly with truth—in ever diminishing numbers! Not very many years ago they nested beside the inland lochs, but now the wise birds—and where in all the feathered kingdom can you find wiser?—more generally seek some uninhabited sea-girt islet with no land beyond it but only the hill and dale of ocean, until the green and mist-hidden shores of Newfoundland are reached, realms where the greylag are replaced by their cousins, the glorious Canada geese of the West.

In olden days the greylags were regularly seen and slain in many a Welsh vale and southern county. They have their place in English history—were not the shafts of the bowmen at Crécy tipped with their feathers? And can't we imagine that the arrow tipped with the wing-pinions of a wild goose clove swifter than that furnished only with the tame? The birds in life flew high in the gale, but never so swiftly as the arrow which rushed from the string of the forest-born man when he loosed his long-distance shaft.

“What of the shaft?
The shaft was cut in England,
A long shaft, a strong shaft,
Barbed and trim and true.
So we'll drink all together
To the grey goose feather
And the land where the grey goose flew.”

The Fen country used to be a great sanctuary of the greylag in England, but when civilisation drained the marshes the geese in great measure disappeared, though to this day in favourable weather they may be seen in large gaggles flying against the sky or feeding in some spot so exposed as to be generally quite hopeless of approach.

It is probably safe to say that a very large percentage of the grey geese killed in a year come to the gun, the gun very rarely goes to them. The shelter-pit, the ambushment on the line of flight succeed ten times for the once when stalking is the method of attack. This is a pity, for the wild goose is certainly harder to approach than the red deer stag. Also, whereas we can kill our stag at two hundred yards, we must go six times closer to the greylag.

My first bout with grey geese was sufficiently inglorious. We had, at the time, taken a shooting upon one of the Outer Hebrides, and one day we repaired to an inland loch in order to determine the species of a pair of divers which had nested there. The divers turned out to be of the red-throated kind. Their nest, so the shepherds told us, had been placed upon an island in the centre of the loch.

There was no boat upon the loch but the weather was warm—it was August—so I stripped off my clothes and, leaving my gun upon them, began a slow progress through knee-deep water flowing over weed-grown rocks. To swim was impossible among the jagged rocks, so I continued to pick a slow course accompanied by a large and very melodious bee which made several efforts to settle upon me. At length, as the water deepened, I was able to swim, and presently arrived in the lee of the island and peered over the heather with which it was covered.

The island was narrow, and I found myself face to face at a range of five yards with a large greylag gander, while on all sides his horrified companions rose with wing-music and scolding clamour. Oh for my gun, divided from me by a hundred and fifty yards of peat-blue water! But of course it was not to be and the greylags—nineteen in all—gathered force and space, circled, swung, rose higher and, finally, headed away towards the dunes while I picked my way back full of the certainty that no bird flew as well worth shooting as the grey goose.

The rest of the afternoon was passed in a careful examination of the shores of the loch, for, as every one knows, the doings of geese can be read in feather and trail more easily than those of other birds. It appeared, however, that their visits to Loch Dunscaur were infrequent, whereas over a line of ridge lay another and much larger loch named Vausory.

This loch at its western end possessed a strand of black sand, that, taken in conjunction with the wild hills of sparse heather by which it was surrounded, gave an impression of curious and brooding menace. From its shore a high and narrow peninsula reached out a lean arm ending in a height of rocks, shaped like a closed fist. Below the first and extending about fifty paces was a space of flat shore covered with green grass. Here at last was the home of the greylags. The grass was eaten short, the black sands were seamed and riddled with tracks and trails, the backwaters curtained by a mass of feathers. It was now past six o'clock, meal-times in our island paradise did not exist save at our convenience. Certainly, the obvious and only course was to await the return of the nineteen and of others, for others there certainly were.

Soon enough heather and sod to give shelter to a crouching form were piled up around a depression in the lee of the Fist, and the gunner and spaniel disappeared from view. A little wind came and a shower from the west, then the sky blew clear. An hour passed and part of another. Far overhead a pair of golden plover flew dunewards, the sun sank and the cold northern twilight began to slay the shadows in the hills. But there was no sign of geese. It was nearly dark. A whistling of wings. Can it be the geese? Impossible. Three wild ducks come over fast and high, right overhead. The gun is thrown up, the leader found, the barrels swing. Bang! The duck crumples up and falls a hundred yards out in the loch. The temptation of that shot was too strong, but the taking of it was an indulgence. The gunner knows that and listens, but when the echoes die away all is as it was before. The spaniel, whose short-sighted eyes were ruined by distemper two years before, is taken to the shore, a stone is thrown in, she swims towards the sound. But, though Molly has no eyes of use beyond a range of fifty yards, her nose is for that reason doubtless quite abnormal. She swims on and on, turns, crosses the wind, the stumpy tail beats twice upon the water and soon she is ashore with a fine mallard, not yet of course in anything but very sober plumage.

Then once more wet dog and dry youth go to ground in the heather-scented pit. And now the dark comes rapidly. Another duck passes within easy shot, but good resolutions hold firm and we hear him pitch

in the water with a rush not eighty yards away. Then once more the minutes go by, the sky is green rather than blue, and the stars come out like lights behind blurred glasses. What is that? Whish, whish, three mallards coming straight over. They are five-and-twenty yards up, but look of course much higher. By this time the loch—or most of it—is shrouded in chiaroscuro.

Surely the geese will not come to-night, and the wild ducks offer a lovely shot. Better two ducks in the hand than—Bang! Bang! But we do not get two ducks after all. The swing of the gun was either not sharp enough or it was not “carried through.” The first barrel is a clean miss, the second a rough-and-ready recovery, for the last bird slants down hit in the body, but almost before it strikes the water we know and mourn our mistake. Somewhere out on the loch, with a unison of complaint and a creaking of mighty wings, a large gaggle of geese rise. They must have pitched unseen in the water, and were doubtless swimming up-wind to their accustomed feeding-place. . . .

We rise, retrieve the duck that has lost us our chance of the far nobler birds, and turn sorrowfully homewards—a three-mile tramp. Gloom accompanies us, as it were, hand-in-hand.

But the desire to shoot a greylag is upon us, and the sun is not over the sea-horizon before we are once more on the hills above the Loch of the Black Sands.

We are very young and very keen, but we do not know much concerning the habits of geese. Indeed, we are still a full half-mile away, when a great gaggle of at least a hundred rise from the flat under the Fist. Probably they are not unaccustomed to human apparitions, for they pitch again on the far side of the loch. Out comes the stalking-glass, and a line of approach is mapped out. We make an immense circle, first tying the spaniel in the heather with a handkerchief, and begin a slow and almost ultra-cautious approach.

There is a point which, we believe, will bring the gun within forty yards of the geese, and by steady crawling this spot is almost reached when there arises a sudden and heart-sickening clamour, as, with all the angry conversation so characteristic of startled geese, the great gaggle wings into the air. What can have put them up and off? A moment

later that question is answered. A shepherd appears walking on the skyline. On that occasion, at least, we deserved success.

And now follow days and nights too tedious to write of, though glorious in memory. Morning often finds us on the hills. Once we await the incoming of the geese at dawn, in fact we spend hours in the shelter-pit. Only once do we see the geese, and that is one evening when the whole party are picking Alpine strawberries in the garden; they pass "honking, clamouring in their flight," fifty fathoms high in the blue.

The lease of the shooting is drawing rapidly to a close when one afternoon, accompanied by the ladies, we go out to shoot the Loch of the Black Sands for duck. By half-past four o'clock we have finished, and we sit down beside the Black Sands to make tea. We have previously examined the haunt of the greylags, only to find that they have deserted it for some time. The kettle boils, and we are sitting, cups in hand, when quite suddenly, and quite low over the hill behind, sweep a dozen geese. We spring for our guns—my comrade reaches his—but on sight of us the greylags have turned, and are swinging rapidly away. Too far! A charge of No. 6 rattles loudly against the feathers, and two days later we have departed, baffled, beaten, for the south.

And now we must skip thirteen years, during all of which I never saw a greylag, though I killed many other kinds of geese, both in the old world and the new. Often, indeed, at divers times and by various camp-fires, when the geese had been "plenty" and the luck kind, my thoughts had turned to those British-bred greylags, upon which I had been, so to speak, entered, and I wondered if it would ever be my lot to try them again. I hardly thought so. Thirteen years is a long time. It seemed unlikely, for, from all I heard, more and more gunners, in search of sport, were with each year taking passage in Messrs. David MacBrayne's steamers and defying the terrors of the Little Minch. Molly was gone, at the ripe age of fifteen, to the happy hunting-grounds where leashes are not. Her place had been taken by a succession of her offspring of both sexes, one at least of which gained fame. But in the year 1909 I was presented with a Labrador whose acquisition revived a keenness for the shot-gun which had for years vanished or burnt low before

the stronger fascinations of the rifle. If I had been told at the time that I was taking the Hebridean shooting for Sinbad, I should have probably denied the charge *in toto*, but looking back now I must admit that the big black dog was perhaps not without his influence. "To most of us," says Lord Buxton in this connection, "our geese are swans," and I can frankly own that I am happier when my dog behaves well and my shooting is not all that it might be, than when my barrels are straighter than usual and my dog does not reach such standard as is his. Shooting without a dog is truly the egg without salt—an insipid business.

I will not describe the journey to the north and then to the west, or the joy of remembered scenes which even the quick roll of the good ship *Lapwing* was powerless to destroy in its entirety. Let it suffice that we arrived on the evening of August the first.

The morning of the second was spent by my companion E. and myself in walking over the portions of the shoot which lay near the house. All was excellent. The marshes, the dunes, and the bays seemed as full of game as ever, but a question as to geese elicited from the ghillie that "he was not thinking they go any more to Vausory now." Vausory, as I have explained, being the Loch of the Black Sands. This was sad, but definite.

About four o'clock my friend E., who is both ardent and well-skilled, departed to fish one of the lochs, while I, accompanied by my wife and the ever-faithful Sinbad, went for a stroll on the dunes. Of course a gun went too. It was our intention to walk down to Scolpaig Point, and on the way the dunes were "full of in-popping rabbits and up-flying gulls." There were also great flocks of green plover and curlew, the former of which swung high above us, while the latter, the scouts, spies, and watchdogs of the tide-side, fled to sea-surrounded sanctuaries on our appearance. After walking down the long line of hillocks which abut on one of the farthest-west cart-tracks in the Hebrides, we came out in a great field of potatoes growing in the sand, and, passing through these knee-high, arrived at a final dune, from which the ground falls away into a wide flat plain that here extends to the high bents of the Atlantic sea-edge.

The plain of this early August season was rich with delicate blue-

WHITE-FRONTED GOOSE

(*Anser albifrons*)

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Swan Lake, Ill. 1900



bells, and here and there the short sweet turf was dotted with sea-pinks and blowing cotton-flowers. Beyond it lay the blue sea, and the silver wonder-strand of the bay. The evening was so beautiful that the truth is we were not troubling ourselves very much about the presence of game, and, for the time, plover and curlew were quite minor interests; but a single glance at the flowered plain caused us both to sink down, while I quickly take out my telescope. What are they, those numbers of dark grey forms standing out there in the centre of the flat? Greylag geese, and over one hundred and fifty of them.

But what is to be done? The geese are in the centre of this large open plain, with not a vestige of shelter within half a mile of them. We have a 12-bore shot-gun and two cartridges loaded with No. 3 shot, picked out from among a handful of No. 7's. The wind is off-shore, we know nothing about the line of flight which the geese, if disturbed, will take. There is nothing for it but guess-work. Nevertheless, I point out to my wife a low outcrop of sand behind which I mean to try and conceal myself, while she attempts to drive the geese to me. We separate, and Sinbad and I, with the line of dunes between us and the geese, hurry on our way. A long run and a cautious crawl take me to my hiding-place, that proves to be a ridge about two feet in height, along the top of which the rabbits have burrowed out a regular warren. There is exceedingly little cover, and knowing, as I do, that I must be, as far as the geese are concerned, very near their skyline, I dare not raise my head. I lie flat on my face in the bents, Sinbad has curled himself up in the trough of a rabbit-hole. While we are waiting several rabbits come out and play, frisking and gambolling within a few yards. And now a few minutes pass, and then I am suddenly aware that the geese are on the wing and coming straight at me. Are there any of my old friends among them? They say a wild goose lives a score of years, so there well may be! On and on they come, not fifteen yards high and straight for me. Forty seconds more and a brace, at least, will be mine. But, as they near me, one bird and then another notices something which is not as it should be; indeed, they can hardly fail to see me from the elevation they have attained, and the few handfuls of bents which I have scattered over myself do not sufficiently hide it. The geese divide into

two bodies, one passes to each side; those on the right are nearer, and of them one, a big gander, is nearer than the others. He is but little less than forty yards off. As he comes level I fire my first barrel at him. But he gathers himself up and, with slower beat of pinion, carries on; nor is he stopped by the second barrel, but he separates from the rest and heads at right angles away over the dunes. He does not clear the summits by more than a yard or two and is then shut out from sight. But no searching, though we search both long and carefully, reveals him. I go home wishing I had never fired, or had swung a little quicker, or any other of the many wishes that crowd into the mind of one who wounds or kills to no good end, and whose victim becomes the prey of hoodie or of black-back.

Now, almost every day we saw the geese, sometimes on the plain, sometimes in the cornfields, or again upon the shores of the estuary, or even out at sea. I do not know how many hours E. and I spent in pursuit of them. We had agreed never to fire unless comparatively sure of success, a promise nobly fulfilled by my companion when he put up a couple of hundred of them, the nearest at little over fifty yards.

We lay for them in the corn, losing as we waited chance after chance at teal, duck, plover, and pigeon. Once I spent three hours within a hundred yards of them, and then at last came success.

It had been a dreadful day. My diary says, "pouring rain and storm and mist," but towards afternoon the wind chopped round and there shone out one of those blue hours which heaven vouchsafes us only in the Western Isles. The laird, E., one of the ladies and I set out after the geese, news of their whereabouts having been brought in by a drenched horseman early in the afternoon.

We were still over a mile away when we discovered a large gaggle of them, some gathered upon the highest point of a peninsula which thrust out its weed-hung flanks into the ocean. The peninsula itself was capped with short grass and its few acres contained a couple of lochs, one so near the sea that after a gale from the west its surface was covered with great sailing pinnacles of foam, formed of the "spume and spin-drift of ocean." E. and the laird at once set off, as there was good cover right up to the geese, while, having placed Mrs. E. as a stop on the dunes,

Sinbad and I lay down behind a rolling ridge and waited for developments. The geese rose wild before the stalking-party and presently headed straight for us. They were coming down-wind at a tremendous pace, and being high in the air perceived the ambush, but not in time to save the leading bird, which died in the blue from the effects of two barrels of No. 3 shot. The majority of the birds passed quite low over Mrs. E., and had one of my companions been in her place a right and left was more than probable.

Luck, of course, never comes singly, and on the way home we found a large flock out on the "plain." While the ghillie and the laird drove these, E. and I took up our places in the dunes. Once again the geese came my way, and one was dropped in the estuary where Sinbad and I spent the early hours of night in search, for it had driven ashore among a maze of islands.

And now our luck with the greylags had turned indeed. On the following day A. drove them to me and I fired two long barrels. The shot-at bird, a magnificent gander, a very father of geese, left the flock hard-hit and disappeared "among the solitary downs," nor did search reveal his corpse. Yet when presently, seeing the "postie" on the hill, we hurried back for our mail, it was to find the gander had been picked up by a passing herdsman and by him deposited upon the round grass-plot in front of the house.

The next casualty which occurred in the greylag ranks was due to a most remarkable shot with a .303 rifle. The flock were resting on the sands when A. pressed trigger and flicked out the brains of an old gander at a little over three hundred paces. He said, with due modesty afterwards, that he doubted if he could do it again! And with that shot let the story of our campaign against the grey legions end. We got many others, but never one but cost its quota of effort and tried the qualities of the stalker. Skoll to the grey goose! Skoll to one of the most sporting birds that fly!

Year by year they say the numbers of greylags lessen. Whether this is really so it is hard to determine. My experience runs contrary to this opinion, as on my last visit there were certainly three geese to every one that I saw on my first. This state of affairs was possibly, however,

largely due to the fact that a keen goose-shooter had taken the adjacent shootings and with them an island for many years peculiarly beloved of the greylag tribe. Doubtless when he stirred them up there they came to us, and when we pursued them they returned to him. Moreover, we found that when he left at the end of August the geese also left almost immediately, nor in the latter part of September did we see them save on a single occasion when, one day while sailing we were driven by contrary winds out of our course, we fired at a curlew in the vicinity of Goose Island. Straightway some hundreds of the great birds arose from its salty lawns and that evening were seen in our cornfield, but before the next dawn had returned once more into their sanctuary.

The grey goose's nesting-places have never been shrouded in mystery as have those of certain other birds. As far as Europe is concerned, it breeds in Norway, in Russia, in Denmark, and in Spain, nor is it other than common in the East, though there it is supposed by some to be represented by an allied form, but as far as the British Isles are concerned it has been, like the Celts, pushed ever farther to the north and the west.

In the far north of Scotland and in the Western Isles there are still wilds where the grey goose constructs her enormous nest, which measures as much as eight to nine feet in circumference. She lays her eggs upon a lining of down plucked from her breast. The pairing takes place in May, and this season, with that occupied by the hatching of the eggs, forms the only period of the year when the grey geese of the Outer Hebrides are not gathered together in flocks. This is no doubt caused by the occurrence of the moulting-season in mid-July, when for some days grey geese totally lose their powers of flight. Fortunately at such times they are protected by the Wild Birds Preservation Act, or it is terrible to think what damage might be inflicted by a single crew of fishermen who chanced to stumble upon some moulting colony, and for this purpose the same spot is visited by the birds year after year with the utmost conservatism. The moult is not of long duration, and the birds have been seen strong on the wing in the end of July.

Few sights are finer than that of a great flock alighting. In the air the glory of their flight lies in its strength and in the wonderful formation

of the feathered phalanx, but once a single cautious bird has alighted, watch the rest swinging and swooping in aerial gymnastics which one would fancy all too light and undignified for such grave and reverend birds. They swoop and swing like plover, and then, as they begin to feed, mark the short alert step, and, above all, mark that sentinel in whose care lies the safety of the feathered republic. Often have I lain watching geese for hours at a time. Once I saw a sentinel remain unrelieved for fifty-five minutes. They may remain longer, certainly sometimes the period is shorter, for I have known the watcher to be relieved three times within the hour.

There he stood on his point of vantage; presently some other birds came feeding towards him. One of them stood up, and the sentinel resigned his duties and vanished into the private life of the flock. I have never seen the sentinel goose ask for relief by plucking at a comrade with his bill, as some observers record, yet of one thing I am certain, the geese understand each other, and I verily believe converse together.

II

We have seen, then, that in summer and early autumn, that is from August 15th to the end of September, grey goose or greylag goose shooting is a delightful sport; but as the year closes, and in January and February, the pursuit of this finest of all British fowl reaches its height. A great number of migrant gaggles—both greylags and white-fronts—from the north arrive, and the keen hunter may see numbers of geese in the day though he may not bag one at all. In Uist, as elsewhere, winter changes the face of the land. Gone are the meadows of clover and of flowers, the reeds upon the lochs become black and the level of water rises. Cover disappears, or at least all cover that has life does, until one is left with nothing but the rocks and the dunes and the irrigation ditches, the last full of water and only to be used by the very keen.

Still, it is at this season when the winds rave over these treeless isles that the goose-shooter comes to the height of his desire, and can spend day after day with telescope and shot-gun among the dunes, beside the lochs, or lying out upon some island among the sands of the Sound, where

his long vigil may at length be rewarded by the geese feeding in or coming in with the tide. Such vigils, however, often curtail the spending of four or five hours on the islands, as, when the tide rises, the most frequented of these are cut off by deep water from the mainland.

There are many ways in which geese may be hunted at this season. First of all, there is driving. Greylag geese, and white-fronted geese, in winter, when the lie of the country is at all in their favour, are the most difficult of all British land-loving fowl to outmanœuvre. The qualifying adjective "land-loving" is necessary, in that the vast tracts of open sand and mud beloved of the brent render their pursuit with a shoulder gun with any reasonable chance of success often quite out of the question. Grey geese, on the other hand, feed largely upon the short grass, such grass as grows upon seaside golf-links, and so it is that sometimes the hills, knolls, and hummocks play into the gunner's hand and he obtains his reward. But first and last grey-geese shooting means much work, discomfort, and exposure for few shots. The old ganders and geese are as much masters of their feathered squadrons as any German General acting according to plan.

In February 1912, several gaggles of grey geese were to be seen every morning upon the Big Bog. They always took up the same position, one with open and level ground upon every side for half a mile. There, in perfect safety, they were wont to allow the gunner to approach to within 500 yards, when they would rise and defeat him.

A certain amount of careful watching at length proved that, firstly, the geese were most plentiful upon the bog at dawn, and, secondly, that shortly after that hour they were in the habit of flying towards Paible over the low dunes, whereas at other times, and notably later in the day, they flew out towards Dunscaur, and the hills and lochs of inland Uist.

About a mile from the marshy sanctuary of the geese their early line of flight took them over some low dunes. Here we placed a line of butts, constructed with care. There were four butts: one was under the wall of a cattle-fold or "fank"; the next was a mere hole upon the top of a dune sixty or seventy feet high, and shaped like a castle pudding; the remaining two were carefully placed about a hundred yards apart upon some more level ground which extended to the shores of an estuary.

We were two guns four times, three guns once, and one gun upon no less than eleven occasions. The line of goose-butts was fortunately not far from the house, but, even so, it took some determination to rise by candle-light and fare forth in the dark to spend an hour or so while John Macdonald went round and stirred up the geese from the Houghary, or farther, side. Also luck was peculiarly unpropitious. On the one occasion when we were three, one of us fired a high shot, the geese passed on, but later in the day, a small boy appeared with a large gander which, he said, had fallen from the clouds into Paible Loch. Had we always been three guns, or even two, the tale might have been different and the tally also, but towards the end of the time it was left to me alone to carry on and, morning after morning, anything from one hundred to three hundred greylag geese passed over the butts, but never over the same butt, and only once over the occupied butt. One morning, as I strained my eyes from the Castle-Pudding butt, two splendid lots of geese came over the Fank butt quite low. Thinking the others would follow the same line of flight, I rushed down, put off another gaggle by so doing and, when once safely behind the Fank wall, had the chagrin of seeing a lot of five birds pass exactly over the Castle Pudding. In fact, on the whole eleven mornings I only fired once, and then without result, nor was there any morning when between two and three hundred geese failed to come, and usually they came low. In a word, the campaign ended in their favour.

When September is nearing its end, the opportunities of greylag shooting reach their height. At this time of the year the geese—if they have been properly treated—have contracted the habit of spending the night on the stubbles and in the patches of uncut corn, which wisdom and cunning will leave for them. They spend the day either by the lochs in the heathery interior of the island, or upon a peninsula which forms the most westerly point of Britain. Thither they fly when disturbed by the carts and cowherds at daylight. As the sun sinks, and long before it grows dark, the geese come down to the cornlands, although they are too wary to actually alight on the stubbles; they take up a position in the open plain within half a mile from whence they watch the farmhands, until at 6 or 6.30 they depart. Then the geese begin to walk in

towards the corn. By lying up before the first gaggle arrive, a shot can be obtained if the area of corn is not too large. But once the shot has been fired, the trick can never be repeated with much chance of success except by moonlight. On the whole, it is better and wiser not to shoot the geese in the corn too often, but rather to study their lines of flight to and from it. More especially is this the case when first the geese come to the corn. They should always be left alone for a week, after that they will bear a good deal of persecution before they will allow themselves to be driven away. Ducks are the same in this respect.

I have never killed more than two grey geese at a shot, though once, when on the promontory, two of us fired our four barrels at five incoming greylags and dropped four. Only once have I scored a fair right and left at greylags in Britain. This was on the occasion of a drive when we put up the geese from the estuary towards the corn. But sitting up one night, at dawn I killed a single goose which flew over, and the moment I had reloaded another which had been disturbed by the shot. I have no idea what other people have averaged with greylag geese, but personally any day when we got a goose at all was a red-letter day, and the best of snipe or duck shooting was considered well lost. This point of view, of course, is apt to elevate grey-geese shooting to the plane of big-game hunting, than which it is certainly a more difficult performance. To stalk a hundred grey geese, possessed of two hundred eyes, to within forty yards will call for more skill in stalking than the approach of the wildest four-footed beast to within one hundred and fifty. It has occasionally happened that gunners, disgusted at their failure to approach geese with a shot-gun, have gone up against them with a Mannlicher or Mauser rifle, and have thus got a bird or two by firing at two hundred or three hundred yards. This course is absolutely fatal to the shoot. Greylag geese are quite aware of the range of a shot-gun, and it does not take them long to appreciate that of a rifle. But, as geese loathe and hate the unexpected, it takes a very few bullets whistling over or among them to cause them to develop a dislike for the country and area in which such things can happen. In a word, they go. Nor must it be forgotten that, at the seasons when greylag shooting is at its best, it is very unlikely that many shooting tenants will be in the north, so that the geese can usually

attain a sanctuary. This makes for good, as not very many greylags can survive the Small Holdings Act. For years geese return to the same spots, but when on their return they find Progress, in the shape of a croft, upon the ground once dedicated to the sea-wind and themselves, they accept the notice to quit. So they depart and seek new isles; but the supply of new isles is limited and the geese suffer. It is not shooting that is so disastrous, but the fact that in July, when the birds moult, there is a period of days when even the old ganders cannot fly. At such times if they meet man their lot is hard indeed. The fact that to kill geese in July is against the law may or may not weigh with the individual fisherman, usually not at all, so he lands and beats the young geese on the head with an oar—the parents take to the water where they are pretty safe; but these happenings are for the geese economically unsound, and they are being pushed ever further to find new sanctuaries where they may conduct their nesting in peace. Apart from all else the human race owe a deep debt to the greylag, for unquestionably he is the parent of all our domesticated geese. Hybrids between the wild goose and the tame are common in the Hebrides.

The early morning is undoubtedly the best time for getting a chance at greylags. It is not difficult to find the places where they pass the night, and a careful study of the ground will give the hunter some idea for a successful approach.

Thus I remember one island where a gaggle of eight greylags were used to spend every night. This island at its western end developed into a promontory perhaps five hundred yards in length by three hundred in breadth. In the very centre of this lawn of short grass the geese were to be seen every morning. During the night there was ample evidence that they patrolled the entire promontory, but daylight always seemed to find them one hundred yards from any possible approach.

Along the north side the dunes rose six or eight feet above the edge of the shore, and it was therefore an easy matter to approach from that side, yet, owing to the fact that the geese were always careful to remain in the middle of the ground, to attempt a shot was useless. Two or three times I got within one hundred to one hundred and fifty yards of these eight geese. When the sun had been up a short time they always

rose and left, but in the opposite direction, and never along the same line of flight. I noticed, however, that they always flew east and across a channel of the sea to the mainland, but, as I have said, their line of flight was never the same to within a few hundred yards. The problem now was how to narrow their flight so as to ensure as far as might be their passing over a certain point. I decided to make two scarecrows and set them up in the dark on the edge of the bank, about two hundred yards apart, and then take my place between them. The paper scarecrows were made and tied on sticks, and well before the dawn I arrived to set them up. Now I should like to be able to say that the ruse was crowned with success, but, as a matter of fact, I had just arrived at the point where I intended to set up my first scarecrow when the geese, moving for some reason earlier than usual, flew clean over me. Hastily dropping the scarecrows I cocked my gun and fired both barrels at the huge indistinct birds. There was a satisfactory plop, but only one, and the geese never while I was there returned to let me try my scarecrows, though I often saw the seven that once were eight through the glass at other points of the shooting.

THE END

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